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A Man's Sin; OR, HIS LAWFUL WIFE.

A Woman's Heart History.

BY RETT WINWOOD,
AUTHOR OF "WAS SHE A WIFE?" "A BRIDE
AT SIXTEEN." "WIFE OR WIDOW?"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Think'st thou that I could bear to part
With thee, and learn to halve my heart?
—BYRON.

It was one of those perfect October days
when the air one breathes seems like a draught

of ambrosia, every breath that fans the cheek a caress.

In the vine-clad porch of a pretty cottage *ornée*, overlooking Lake George, sat Neria Gordon. She was gazing dreamily at the landscape spread before her. It looked like a picture. Scarce a ripple stirred the placid bosom of the lake, which lay burning and darkening like a burnished shield in the yellow sunlight. The forests were brilliantly tinted with scarlet and gold, and a soft, purplish haze rested lovingly upon the encircling hills.

Every day for six months the young girl had beheld nearly the same scene, but it never lost its subtle charm. Every leaf and blade of grass was precious to her soul; for was it not here she had tasted the crowning happiness of her life?

A gentle sigh heaved her bosom. "I wonder if I shall be so happy anywhere else?" she murmured, in a dreamy tone.

At this moment a step stirred the gravel, and

a young man came slowly along a path leading from the lake. Neria sprung up to meet him.

"I have been thinking what a delightful summer we have spent here, Lawrence," she said. "I am so sorry it is over."

The young man threw himself into a seat. He was a handsome fellow, tall, heavily limbed, with one of those brilliant dark faces women find so attractive.

"Does it pain you to think of going away?" he asked.

"Oh, very much."

He looked at her eagerly, the troubled frown that had wrinkled his brow a moment before vanishing quite away.

"I am glad you like the place, Neria," said he. "It is healthy and retired—all that is charming. There is nothing to hinder us from making it our permanent home, if you feel so disposed."

She looked up quickly, the plan was so different from any he had ever made before.



"SILLY FOOL!" MUTTERED THE WATCHER. "MEN ARE TREACHEROUS, AND SO YOU WILL YET DISCOVER."

"Do you think it could be managed, Lawrence?"

"Easily. Mrs. Gross, our landlady, would be delighted to have you remain. If you wish, I will settle the matter with her at once."

"But would you like it?"

"I?" he echoed, with an embarrassed laugh. "Oh, yes. It would be a delightful retreat to which to hie from the cares and bustle of the world. It would please me above all things. We would see much less of each other than we do now—that is the only drawback."

Something in the words and tone struck a sudden chill to the young girl's heart.

"You do not mean to say, Lawrence, that you would go away even for a day, and leave me behind?" she faltered.

"Why not?" he answered, impatiently. "You and I cannot expect always to be together as we are now, Neria. It would be delightful, but out of the question. I have my business to look after, and could not afford to let it suffer."

"Must we be separated, dear husband? Is it really necessary?" she asked, her sweet lips quivering, her upturned face full of pathetic pleading.

"I'm afraid so, darling. But don't look so broken-hearted. I shall be with you all that is possible. You may expect to see me every week. But our holiday is over. I have been thinking for some time of telling you so. I have been idle too long already, and must go back to my work."

"Are we so very poor?"

"Poor enough," he answered, dropping his eyes rather than meet her clear, honest gaze.

"No matter. That need not separate us. I am young and strong; I could go with you and help about your work, whatever it may be."

"Impossible!"

"Why? I would like it, and I am quick to learn."

Then, still looking at him steadily, she added:

"What is your business, Lawrence? You never told me."

"You would not understand, darling. I did not wish to trouble you with wearisome details. Let us talk of something else."

Neria sighed. These evasions perplexed and troubled her. It almost seemed as though her husband had something to conceal.

Lawrence himself broke the brief silence that ensued, saying, in a tone of affected carelessness:

"You and I have been married for half a year, but it is singular how little we know of each other's history. I do not remember ever having heard you speak of your relatives, or early friends."

Neria changed color.

"I had reasons for being silent," she said, in a low voice. "The lines have not always fallen to me in pleasant places. The names that should have been sweetest to my lips were the most difficult to utter. Forgive me, Lawrence. One of these days you shall hear all there is to tell."

"Why not now?"

"Be patient a little longer," she pleaded.

Lawrence gazed at her uneasily. It was very strange what had so turned her against her own kin she could not endure even to mention them.

"What does it matter, after all?" he said to himself, half angrily. "If there has been any scandal or crime, I would rather never be told."

Gently drawing her to him, he added aloud:

"Let me tell you why I referred to your friends and early life. You will be lonely with me away. The thought suggested itself that you might be happier surrounded by those you had known and prized in childhood—"

"No," she passionately interrupted. "You are the only person I love in all the wide earth. Don't talk of a separation; I could not bear it. Wherever you go I will follow. Whatever burdens fall upon your shoulders I will help you bear. No one could take your place, or console me for your absence. Oh, my love, do not break my heart by leaving me behind when you go away!"

The young man looked both pleased and annoyed. It was something to have won a love like this, however troublesome it might eventually prove.

"Foolish child," he whispered, gently caressing her. "I did not dream you would take the matter so to heart. But, take courage; I will never leave you."

At the moment he meant it. Neria's distress and clinging affection had touched his callous heart.

"I will be true to her, whatever may come of

it," he thought, yielding to the generous impulse that came over him.

Just then Mrs. Gross, who was gathering herbs in the little kitchen garden not far away, came in sight of the young couple sitting on the porch. A frown wrinkled the woman's brow. Her own life had been soured by trouble and disappointment, and it made her envious to witness the happiness of others.

"Billing and cooing as usual," she muttered.

"I wonder how much longer it will last?"

She stood up, peering curiously through the vines. A pretty pink flush had kindled in Neria's cheek, and her head rested confidently against her husband's shoulder.

"Silly fool!" muttered the watcher. "Men are all base and treacherous at heart, and so you will yet discover."

Mrs. Gross had always felt lurking doubts of Lawrence Gordon's sincerity. Six months before he had brought Neria to her cottage, a bride. They had idled the whole summer away in this self-imposed seclusion. Many points on the lake were gay with summer visitors, but the young couple never received visitors, or left the immediate neighborhood.

"Mr. Gordon is a man of the world; it is not natural for him to live so retired," thought the woman. "Something is radically wrong, you may be sure."

At this moment a boy came up the path with a letter. Lawrence snatched it eagerly, and rising from his seat, advanced a little nearer the clump of bushes behind which Mrs. Gross stood, before breaking the seal.

There were two envelopes, the inner sealed and post-marked like the other. Mrs. Gross caught a momentary glimpse of the name on the envelope that had been inclosed, and almost cried aloud. She felt absolutely certain it was not Lawrence Gordon!

What did it mean? While she stood motionless, Lawrence broke the second seal. A muttered imprecation fell from his lips. He read the letter twice over, then tearing it across, thrust the fragments into his pocket, and strode away.

The woman looked after him; her thin lips tightly compressed. It was easy to see that he had been greatly disturbed.

"I would give my right hand to know what's in that letter!" she muttered.

CHAPTER II.

GONE!

Oh, had he ever loved, he would have thought
The worst of tortures bliss, to silent parting.

—CIBBER.

NERIA'S slumbers were broken and disturbed that night. An indefinable foreboding that could not be shaken off, sleeping or waking, had taken possession of her mind. Once she awakened with the dreary sense of being left alone, forsaken.

"Lawrence, where are you?" she cried, aloud. The touch of his lips upon her cheek answered her. Clinging to his neck, she burst into hysterical tears.

"I have had such a wretched dream! I thought you had gone away and left me."

"Silly child," he said, half-impatiently. "You must have been worrying yourself over the conversation we held this afternoon."

"Yes, I could not help it, Lawrence. I am nervous and hysterical to-night. The feeling is strong upon me that something dreadful is about to occur."

"Nonsense. You need a soothing draught to quiet your nerves. I am going for one."

He was absent some time. Neria drank eagerly the mixture that had been prepared.

"Lawrence, how good you are," she murmured, lifting her eyes lovingly to his face. "It would be ungrateful to fear any wrong at your hands."

He turned hastily away, going to the open window. Was it fancy?—or did his face really look pallid and haggard in the uncertain light?

Neria looked after him anxiously, but before she could make up her mind on this point a strange drowsiness stole over her, benumbing every faculty, and she fell fast asleep.

The October sunshine was streaming in at the window in a flood of gold, and a solitary bird, perched on the balcony without, was singing his matin song when she awoke.

The hour was late. Finding herself alone, Neria made a hasty toilet, and hurried below. The little porch where Lawrence smoked his morning cigar was vacant, and she ran through the silent hall, calling his name.

Mrs. Gross was in the dining-room giving a few last touches to the breakfast-table.

"Where is Mr. Gordon?" Neria asked.

The woman looked up quickly.

"He has not been down this morning, unless—"

"Unless what?" cried Neria, alarmed by her hesitation. "Speak out."

"I found the front door standing open when I came down-stairs, and Mr. Gordon's hat and coat were gone from the rack."

"He has gone for an early walk," the young girl said, but flew back to her chamber, not knowing why she went, or what she expected to find.

A glance told her that many of his little belongings were missing from the room. On the dressing-case, with a newspaper thrown carelessly over it, lay a small packet addressed to herself. She had quite overlooked it before going below.

Neria's heart beat almost to suffocation as she tore the wrappings asunder. A letter fell out, and a roll of bank-notes. Everything swam before the girl's eyes for a moment, and she sat down, her forehead covered with heavy drops.

"Read the letter," said a husky voice at her elbow. "That will tell you whether the wretch has gone away for good."

It was Mrs. Gross who spoke. She had followed the girl up-stairs, and divined all at a glance.

Quite mechanically Neria obeyed. It ran thus:

"I have received an imperative summons that calls me from your side for a time. After our conversation of yesterday, it seemed wiser to go without any words of adieu. Remain with Mrs. Gross until you hear from me again. You will be liberally provided for. While I live you shall never want for money, or a friend."

LAWRENCE.

The letter fell to the floor. Neria sat for a while with her hands clasped over her face, not knowing or caring that Mrs. Gross had picked up the crumpled sheet, and was eagerly devouring every word.

She felt incredulous, benumbed. Was it possible this cruel letter had been written to her, and by him—the husband she had loved so devotedly and trusted so entirely?

No, no! She could not believe it. Lawrence was incapable of such heartless conduct. It must be a jest to try the strength of her affection.

The harsh, rasping voice of Mrs. Gross broke in upon her reflections:

"And so the villain has deserted you, madam! I half expected he would; but the crisis has come sooner than I looked for it."

Neria lifted her dazed eyes to the woman's face. She scarcely comprehended a word.

"Poor thing! The man has made you his dupe. I've always felt suspicious of him. He pretended to be poor and humble enough, but it was plainly to be seen that he was a born gentleman, accustomed to the best society, and to being pampered and flattered. I am amazed that you could have been so blinded."

The girl sat motionless, one hand clinched tightly over her heart. Slowly the meaning of Mrs. Gross's words was dawning upon her senses.

"It's a terrible plight to be in," the hard, relentless voice went on, "but you might as well make the best of it. I am going to speak very plainly to you. It is not your fault, poor thing, that you have been cruelly deceived. You have lived under my roof for six months as Lawrence Gordon's wife. It looks now as though you had no claim to that title, or he would scarcely have gone away, and left you like this. But—"

A shrill cry broke from the lips of the wretched girl.

"Hush, oh, hush!"

"You had better let me speak, miss. Who else is to help and counsel you? I was about to say that I shall not drive you from the house, as almost anybody else would do under the circumstances. I cannot help feeling some compassion for one so wantonly betrayed. For the present you can remain as though nothing had happened, and we will decide together what course had better be pursued in the future."

The forsaken one sprung up wildly, clasping both hands to her forehead.

"Leave me," she cried. "For pity's sake go away! Give me time to think my trouble over. I feel like a madwoman."

She looked it, with her hollow cheeks and burning eyes. Mrs. Gross's heart was not all adamant; after hesitating a moment she silently left the room.

Neria tried to think calmly and connectedly. In vain. Her brain burned, her mind wandered.

in a wild chaos. She could not realize that Lawrence had really gone and left her.

"It cannot be," she moaned. "He loved me truly, he was my lawful husband, no matter what Mrs. Gross may say. Something very strange has happened to call him away, but he has not willfully deserted me."

And yet, there was the evidence of the letter—a letter that said so much! She recalled, too, the soothing draught that had caused her to fall into a deep, unnatural sleep. Had he been base enough to drug her in order to slip away undetected?

"No, no," she cried aloud.

Rousing herself at last, she slowly and painfully made her way down-stairs to the tidy kitchen where Mrs. Gross was going about the morning's work as though nothing unusual had occurred.

"There has been some mistake," she panted. "I am suffering terribly. Who knows but some direful misfortune has befallen my husband, and he wrote that letter simply to blind and mislead me! I am going to Glentown. There may be news of him at the hotel where he sometimes stops. Oh, Mrs. Gross, I am so weak—help me to get there, and—and—"

She sunk into a chair with such a deathly look that the woman was thoroughly frightened.

"My poor child, try to bear up," she cried. "It's an absurd idea you've taken into your head, but I'll do what I can. I'll call Rob, and he shall drive you over at once."

"Rob" was the hired man. A few minutes later Neria found herself en route for the village, seated by his side.

On reaching the hotel, she sent immediately for the landlord. He came smilingly to meet her, the start of surprise he gave being an involuntary tribute to her youth and beauty.

"I am here to inquire for my husband," she said, keeping her voice steady by a powerful effort. "Perhaps you can tell me something."

Pardon me; I have not the honor of knowing madam—"

"I am Mrs. Lawrence Gordon."

He bowed low. "Ah, indeed! Yes, your husband was here quite early in the morning, but—"

"Where is he now?" Neria demanded, just as he drew her breath.

"Gone. He left for Albany some three hours since."

The poor soul shrank back, as though he had struck her. The words confirmed her worst fears. Pride came to her rescue, however. It would not answer to let the man see what she suffered.

"I—I—wished to see Mr. Gordon again before he went," she faltered, feeling that some excuse for her presence there was necessary.

Drawing her veil over her face, she passed out. The shudder that ran through her frame escaped the man's notice. Little did he dream what a broken and bleeding heart his beautiful guest carried from his presence.

CHAPTER III.

THE AGONY OF SUSPENSE.

I am not mad; too well, too well I feel
The different plague of each calamity.

—SHAKESPEARE.

Word of explanation was necessary to Mrs. Gross of the result of the mission to Neria. She came out, the moment the early dawn broke, and with some kindness helped the girl into the house, and seated her by the sunniest window.

"Take it so to heart," said she. "Scores of young girls have been deluded by a false hope, and left much worse off than they were. Mr. Gordon—if that is his name—has provided liberally for you—"

"Horror, anguish and indignation," cried Neria, her lips white.

"Do you mean? How dare you doubt the fidelity of my marriage with Lawrence?"

"I know from what I know, and have seen," she replied coolly. "A man does not leave his wife in the free and easy fashion Mr. Gordon has taken to rid himself of you."

"We are bound to each other by every tie, human and divine," declared Neria, trembling with excitement.

"You will be able to prove it, my dear."

"It is easily done. We were married in New Orleans, after an acquaintance of only six weeks. I was living as governess in the family of a planter at the time. My husband brought me here immediately. We have remained with you ever since. Oh, there can be no doubt but

it was a *bona fide* marriage. I still have the certificate. I insisted upon keeping it myself, and Lawrence did not care."

She hastily detached from her neck a slender chain of gold from which depended a small locket, and touched a secret spring. Why was it that she fell back, the next instant, her face pale as death could have made it?

The receptacle was empty!

The discovery shocked even Mrs. Gross. If Lawrence Gordon had stolen the certificate, the fact proved that he had dealt with this hapless girl with a studied treachery of which she had deemed him incapable.

"Never mind the loss of that bit of paper, miss," said she, with an effort to console. "It was of no earthly use, I imagine."

But, Neria gave no heed. She sat with both hands pressed tightly to her temples.

"Why did he take it?" she moaned. "Why could he not even leave me that?"

Mrs. Gross stood looking compassionately at the stricken creature a moment, then drew nearer as though she had taken a sudden resolution.

"There's something you ought to know, miss; it would be no kindness to keep it from you now, and may help to throw some light on Mr. Gordon's shameful conduct. After you were gone, this morning, I went into the garden to gather vegetables for dinner, and found the fragments of a letter lodged in the grass. I have read it, and advise you to do the same."

Neria mechanically took the slip of paper the woman offered. It had been torn straight across, leaving a portion out of the middle of the letter, which was without beginning or end.

This is what was said, written in a woman's hand:

"Your friends are inquiring for you every day, and even I do not know where to address a line save through your favorite club. Positively, this state of affairs shall not continue. Unless you soon present yourself in proper person, I shall set out by myself to find you and learn the cause of your mysterious disappearance."

"It is high time, too, that you had established matters on a surer footing with Mrs. Faunce's beautiful *protégée*. She loves you, and is secretly grieving over your continued absence. She will inherit the whole of the old lady's immense wealth. It would be folly to suffer such a prize to slip through your fingers. We have nearly reached the end of our tether, and something must be done quickly unless you wish to see absolute ruin stare you in the face. Since it is in the books that you must marry an heiress or be reduced to beggary, it might better a thousand times be this one than another."

What followed had been torn away. Neria crushed the fragment in her hand. There could be no doubt but this letter had been written to her husband. He had received it the night before, and it was this that had taken him away!

Mrs. Gross, meanwhile, was attentively scanning the young girl's face.

"I'm going to give my version of this affair," she said grimly. "You can take it for what it is worth. Mr. Gordon is a man of the world, and such persons never give a second thought to wrecked lives or broken hearts. He has had his holiday, and you've seen the last of him. You might as well be reconciled to give him up. He has gone back to his aristocratic friends, and will doubtless marry the heiress who has been selected for him."

Mrs. Gross did not intend to be cruel; she only wished to prepare the girl for the inevitable. Great was her surprise and consternation, therefore, to see her start up suddenly with a long, shuddering cry, and fall insensible.

All that day and night Neria lay like one dead. She did not moan or weep—only a faint fluttering breath showed that she lived.

By the time morning dawned, she had gathered a little strength, however. When Mrs. Gross took up her breakfast at a late hour, she found the poor soul moving about the room dressed in traveling attire.

"Mercy on me! What now?" exclaimed the astonished woman.

"I am going to find my husband," Neria answered in a trembling voice. "Do not seek to dissuade me. I must go. The journey means life or death to me now."

"Poor child! What can you expect to accomplish?"

"I can see Lawrence, and learn his intentions from his own lips. Nothing less would satisfy me." Her voice broke, almost dying away for a moment. "You are a woman, Mrs. Gross, and can divine what I suffer. Suspense and uncertainty are driving me mad. I can not bear them much longer! For God's sake let me go!"

The wild anguish of look and tone Mrs. Gross never forgot.

"Of course you must go, if you feel like

that," she said. "But it will be a fool's errand. The world is wide—you may never succeed in meeting with Mr. Gordon again."

"I shall go direct to Albany. I know the name of the hotel where Lawrence stops when there. If he has gone on, there will at least be information of him."

Remonstrance would have been useless, and Mrs. Gross deemed it the better policy to speed the deserted wife on her way.

"May good luck attend your mission, miss," she said, heartily. "Should it fail, however, or should you for any reason decide to turn back, you are sure of a home and welcome here."

It was late in the afternoon when Neria reached the city. Taking a cab at the railway station, she drove at once to the hotel where she hoped to find her husband. Her heart beat high, she trembled with excitement as she ascended the steps.

Some one was crossing the hall at that very moment. She recognized that firm, manly step, and forgetful of time and place, rushed forward with a faint, heart-thrilling scream.

"Lawrence! Oh, my husband!"

The startled wretch saw and heard. He fell back a step, a muttered imprecation falling from his lips.

"You, Neria! Here!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE FAITHLESS HUSBAND.

To doubt
Is worse than to have lost. —MASSINGER.

HAD a phantom from the other world suddenly risen to confront Lawrence Gordon, he would not have been more astonished than at the unexpected appearance of the woman he had so basely deserted.

For some seconds he stood staring at her like one transfixed. Was it really Neria who knelt there before him with uplifted hands—Neria, the loving, unsophisticated child, whom he had believed wholly subjected to his will, and so trusting and confiding she would never dream of taking a step he had not counseled and sanctioned? He could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses.

The necessity for action recalled almost instantly his wandering wits. Seizing the girl roughly by the arm, he drew her into one of the small reception-rooms, closing and locking the door.

"Now tell me the meaning of this!" he said, releasing her. "Why have you followed me?"

Again she sunk at his feet, her heart growing cold, like a lump of ice in her bosom.

"Don't speak to me so! Don't, Lawrence!" she said, with a voice like one that is smothering.

Her haggard face and evident distress shamed him into an exhibition of something like decency.

"Why did you dog my steps?" he repeated, more kindly. "What led you to come here?"

"I could not live without you."

"Nonsense. I thought you understood it was impracticable for us always to be together. You found the note I left?"

"Yes," she answered.

"That was explanation enough of my sudden departure. You should have been satisfied, and remained quietly with Mrs. Gross."

Neria's heart was sinking lower and lower. She could not disguise from herself the fact that her appearance had annoyed and frightened him. Already she detected an indefinable change in his manner. The gentle courtesy, the airy politeness were gone forever.

Clasping her arms about him, she burst into agonizing sobs.

"Lawrence, husband! my heart is almost broken. How could you leave me in that strange, cruel fashion?"

"I have a horror of scenes," stammered the wretch. "I knew you would not consent to a separation, however brief. The way I took seemed the easiest one out of the difficulty."

"It filled my mind with terrible apprehensions. I thought—I feared—you might intend casting me off forever."

He looked at her curiously, a dark red surging over his face.

"It was a foolish notion; I realize it now," she went on, tremulously. "You could not do anything so heartless and cruel. I am amazed at myself for having doubted you. Forgive me, Lawrence! I had so much at stake, and—circumstances were against you. Oh, I have been very wretched. It would have been madness to remain behind. I wished to hear from your own lips that you love me as truly as ever."

The pallor of her upturned face—the pathetic pleading in her lovely eyes—touched the man's heart. He suddenly took her in his arms.

"Of course I love you, little one," he murmured. "How could you doubt it?"

"It is not true, then, what Mrs. Gross said, I am not really your wife?"

"Did Mrs. Gross say that?"

"Yes, Lawrence. She is naturally suspicious. She claimed you had deceived and forsaken me, and were not what you pretended. I might have given no attention to what she said, but a fragment torn from a letter that was found seemed to confirm everything."

The young man's look of annoyance changed to one of alarm.

"A letter?" he exclaimed. "Where is it? What do you mean? What letter?"

Neria took the crumpled morsel of paper from her pocket and gave it to him.

"I kept it because I hoped for this opportunity to give it to you, and ask an explanation," she said.

Lawrence turned to the open window. After reading the few lines that had caused Neria so great distress, he rolled the torn sheet into a ball, and threw it into the street.

"I am surprised that you permitted such a trifle to trouble you," he said, not without some show of embarrassment. "The letter is from my mother, who has very ambitious views for me. Of course I am not in sympathy with her designs. It would not have been kind to refuse to go to her, however, and I am now on the way."

The explanation seemed reasonable enough, only Neria wondered he had not volunteered it before. How much misery she might have been spared!

"I am glad that is all," she said, eagerly. "We can go together. I must meet your mother some time—it might as well be now as later."

But Lawrence frowned and drew back.

"You do not understand, dear. My mother is a very proud woman. Some preparation is necessary before I can present you as my wife. Her heart is set upon seeing me wedded to another. The disappointment might prove a serious blow if it fell too suddenly. No, I must go on in advance, and prepare the way for your coming."

"You will not be long?"

"Only a few days."

Neria sighed heavily. The misgivings were not wholly lifted from her heart by what she had heard.

"What is to become of me while you are away?" she inquired, after a pause.

Before replying he walked several times up and down the room, as though buried in perplexed thought.

"It is scarcely worth while to return to your old quarters," he said at length. "Mrs. Gross might not prove a pleasant companion after what has occurred. I had better find a nice, quiet place near by, where you can remain."

"I should not mind remaining here at the hotel, if it is only for a day or two."

"The place is too public," he answered, hastily.

"I might keep my room, for that matter. I should not feel like going out with you away."

"You would like better to live more retired."

He quitted the room, presently, to see what arrangements could be made. Neria was quite startled to observe that he locked the door, and took away the key.

Two hours wore on; she had grown very anxious and uneasy when at last he returned.

"I have found just the place," he said, gayly, as he entered; "a pretty little cottage in the suburbs that you can have all to yourself."

"But was it worth while to hire it for so short a time?" Neria objected.

"Of course. I would do anything in the world to insure your happiness, my love."

As he bent to kiss her, the poor, deluded creature clung to him with passionate force.

"I believe you do love me, Lawrence," she murmured.

In a few moments they were ready to set out. Lawrence seemed anxious and restless, and glancing at her curiously, before leaving the room, said with a forced laugh:

"What a woebegone expression! It would never do for strangers to see you like that. Where's your veil?"

She produced it from her pocket, and he tied it securely over her face.

"That's better," he said, with an air of satisfaction, and led her down to the carriage that waited in the street.

It was a long distance to their destination,

and Lawrence, who seemed unfamiliar with the way, alighted more than once to make inquiries. Just at sunset they drew up before a tiny cottage of three or four rooms, quite beyond the city limits.

Lawrence had the key in his pocket. It was a furnished house, the rooms large and airy. Neria saw at a glance that with a cheerful fire burning in the grate her new home could be made to wear a very cosy and pleasant appearance.

"I have engaged a competent woman to take charge of the house, and expect her every moment," Lawrence explained, drawing forward an easy-chair. "You will be very comfortable here."

Neria leaned toward him, a chill feeling of foreboding seizing her heart.

"Oh, Lawrence! One would think you expected me to remain on for an indefinite period."

"Nonsense," he answered. "I thought you would at least be grateful for the trouble I have taken to leave you pleasantly situated."

"So I am. But you know full well that no place would be pleasant to me long unless you were there."

"I shall return almost before you have missed me."

Taking his hand she laid it caressingly against her cheek.

"You will come back, Lawrence?" she said.

"I have your promise?"

"Of course. I hope you are not again giving way to silly misgivings?"

"At the earliest possible moment?" she persisted.

"Yes; I shall count the hours of our separation quite as impatiently as you do."

Neria tried to feel satisfied with this assurance, but somehow the tone sounded hollow, the words insincere.

Shortly afterward the woman who had been engaged as housekeeper arrived. She was tall, lank, and rather hard-looking, and did not impress Neria at all favorably.

"I leave my wife in your care, Mrs. Drury," Lawrence said to her, "and shall hold you responsible for the trust. See that she wants for nothing."

Leaving a well-filled purse on the table, and tenderly embracing Neria, who felt sick and faint at the thought of the coming separation, he whispered a few last words of encouragement, and left the house.

Neria saw him go, and as the last rumble of the carriage wheels died away, sunk half-fainting into a chair.

CHAPTER V.

HOPING AGAINST HOPE.

The dignity of truth is lost
With much protesting. —JONSON.

NEARLY two weeks passed, but no line or message from the recreant husband. Neria counted the lagging hours, and from morning till night sat motionless at one of the windows overlooking the street, watching, waiting, straining her eyes in the distance that she might catch the earliest possible glimpse of his beloved figure.

Her mind was a prey to dismal forebodings. Why this long absence and persistent silence? Again was she forced to the terrible conclusion that Lawrence had indeed abandoned her.

"I see now why he brought me to this out-of-the-way place," she thought, at last giving way to despair. "He intended it for my permanent home. I have nothing more to hope or expect. All his specious promises meant nothing."

If Mrs. Drury knew aught of the missing man, she kept such knowledge to herself.

Neria found ample time to reflect upon her situation, during these days of enforced solitude. She could not fail to realize that a bitter wrong had been done. Lawrence had deceived her in respect to his social position, and why had he secretly taken away her marriage certificate unless he meditated other crimes as well?

But her heart still pleaded for him. There might be a thousand excuses for his conduct. She would wait a little longer before condemning him utterly.

One wet, windy night early in November she left her usual position at the window just as evening closed in, and threw herself on the couch. She felt feverish and sick. There was no longer any hope of seeing Lawrence that night, she thought.

She was mistaken. A discreet rap sounded on the door, presently, and Mrs. Drury entered.

"I have pleasant news," the woman said. "Mr. Gordon has arrived."

Neria sprung up, all her lassitude gone in a moment.

"Where is he?" she panted.

"In the sitting-room—waiting to receive you."

Her limbs trembled as she made her way to the door. Her husband stood just within the room.

"So you have come at last?" she said, without going up to him.

"Yes, Neria. Did you think I had broken my promise, and intended to remain away?" he asked, with a forced laugh.

"I was at a loss what to conclude."

"Well, since I have taken the trouble to come in this storm, you might at least give me a pleasant welcome."

His arms were held out in the old caressing way, and Neria found it impossible to keep up the rôle she had begun. What, after all, was the use of betraying wounded pride or resentment?

"Lawrence, why did you not come before?" she asked, resting her head upon his breast.

"I found my mother quite ill. I am her only child. It was impossible to leave her sooner."

"Is that what kept you? Why, I have been thinking hard and bitter thoughts of you all the while!"

He kissed away the penitent tears that filled her eyes.

"Never mind, love. You will understand me better, by and by."

"I hope so. There must be no more doubts and fears. Of course all is settled now—you will take me away when you go?"

"Not yet. You must be patient," he answered, with some embarrassment.

"Must there be more delay?" she demanded, in a voice of pain.

"Yes. My mother is not strong enough to bear excitement. I could not well enter into any explanation. There will be time enough for that when she recovers."

Neria could not keep back the tears of disappointment that rose to her eyes.

"How long will you be able to remain, now that you are here?" she abruptly asked.

"This is only a flying visit. I must return to New York at once."

"So soon? Lawrence, think of the long, long days I have spent here alone."

"It cannot be helped, dear. My mother's suspicions would certainly be awakened were I to absent myself for a longer period."

"At least take me with you when you go," she implored. "I could be ready in a very few moments. I promise not to be a burden to you in any way. Let me go."

"Impossible!"

"Your mother need not be told until the way is open for an explanation," she continued to urge. "I could take lodgings somewhere in the neighborhood, and live as retired as I do here."

"What would be the use?"

"Do you not understand? I could see you every day of my life. That would make all the difference in the world."

The young man's heart was touched in spite of himself.

"Poor child! How she loves me," he thought. "What a cursed pity that circumstances compel me to play the part of a knave."

Aloud he said:

"The change you urge would scarcely benefit matters. I am closely confined to my mother's bedside, and might not succeed in seeing you more frequently than at present. It would be folly to break up your present home and seek another, under the circumstances."

Neria felt chilled and hurt. She could not help thinking how eager she would have been, with their positions reversed, to make the experiment.

"Tell me the truth, Lawrence," she cried, clinging to him with a loud burst of sobs. "It would be no kindness to keep it from me after all I have suffered. My heart misgives me. Is the love you once professed for me growing cold already? I wish to know. Do you love me no longer?"

"What a foolish question!" he exclaimed, trying to smile.

"I am in earnest. Do not mock me, please. Once we were so happy together. Ah, those bright, blissful days! I fancied they would last forever. But they are gone with the beautiful summer that gave them birth. You appear so strange, so cold, so unlike yourself, Lawrence. First you left me secretly, without a word of farewell, or any clew to your destination. For weary days together I have been without any tidings of you. Even when you do reappear, it is only for a few fleeting mo-

ments. What am I to conclude? That you wish to be rid of me, and are trying to soften the fatal blow? Ah, it is terrible! For God's sake, do not keep me in suspense. I would rather be told the worst at once."

A moment he hesitated; but, bad as he was, he had not the courage to declare the truth.

Drawing her to his heart, and covering her face with kisses, he answered with an air of apparent sincerity:

"How can you say such dreadful things, Neria? Love you? Of course I do. Are you not dearer to me than my own life? Perhaps I have not always manifested that affection sufficiently, but it is a living, burning flame in my heart. I could not live without you. Try to keep up your courage a little longer, darling, and this trial will be over. Only be patient and forbearing. If you understood all, you would know it was impossible for me to have acted differently from what I did."

She believed him. It is so easy for one who loves devotedly to be deceived.

The moments wore on, and the time came very quickly for Lawrence to go. Neria tried to be calm, and keep back her sobs, for she knew how her husband disliked a scene.

"I shall count the hours until you come again," she said at parting.

"Rest assured I shall not remain away a day longer than is necessary," he replied.

After he had gone, all the old doubts and forebodings returned. Neria tried to shake them off, but in vain. In spite of determined efforts to keep up her spirits, she became more unhappy than ever.

"Heaven alone knows when I shall see him again," she said to herself. "Why did I not ask for my marriage certificate? It would be a great comfort to have it in my possession?"

She had forgotten to speak of it while her husband was present, however, and could now only wait patiently until he came again.

This did not happen until another week had gone by. It was evening, as before, when he made his appearance. Neria noticed the fact with a pang of dismay. Did he fear to be seen approaching the cottage by day?

This time he appeared more hurried and ill at ease than before. The first greetings had scarcely been interchanged before the young wife spoke of the certificate.

"Why did you take it away?" she said. "It is all I have to prove to the world that I am your true and lawful wife."

"You shall have it again," he answered, turning aside his face to hide his confusion. "I intended to examine the paper, and return it at once; but neglected to do so."

"Where is it now?"

"Among my belongings at my mother's house in New York."

"When can I expect to receive it?"

"At my next visit. But why are you so anxious for that bit of paper, Neria?"

A flush came into her pale cheeks at the question.

"It is anything but a 'bit of paper' to me," she answered. "It means life, honor, happiness and good name."

"Of course you must have it if you feel like that," he said, rather irritably. "But its possession can neither make or undo anything."

Neria waited in vain to hear him say all had been disclosed to his mother, and the way paved for them to kneel at her feet and invoke her blessing upon their marriage. He did not once allude to Mrs. Gordon except to say, in answer to a direct inquiry, that she was improving rapidly, and on the road to recovery.

When the evening was well advanced he arose to depart.

"Good-by," he said, abruptly, taking her hand in his own. "I must be on my way."

All Neria's fortitude gave way at the thought of parting with him again like this. Clinging to him with bitter sobs and tears, she cried:

"How can I let you go? Lawrence, how can I?"

He freed himself roughly from her embrace.

"Let us have no foolishness, Neria. You know as well as I do that this must be. Why not take a common-sense view of the situation, and keep your self-control?"

She felt hurt and wounded as never before. Sinking down on a chair she saw him depart without another word.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BLOW FALLS.

I have no skill in woman's changeable moods,
Tears without grief, and smiles without a joy
—MATURIN.

DURING the two or three weeks of her sojourn

at the cottage, Neria had never once passed beyond the narrow confines of the grounds. Mrs. Drury executed the few commissions she had outside, and there was nothing to call her into the busy thoroughfares of the city.

One morning, several days subsequent to Lawrence's last visit, feeling unusually restless and nervous, she dressed herself in walking costume, and prepared to go out. Mrs. Drury saw her cross the hall, and looking rather flurried, followed her to the door, even venturing to lay a detaining hand upon her arm.

"I—I hope madam has no intention of going far?" stammered the woman.

"I don't know," Neria replied. "I have been so closely confined to the house of late, the fresh air may do me good."

"You have no errands to run? Because I am more than willing to go in your stead."

"No. It is the exercise I am after."

"Is that all? Why, then, would it not answer to walk up and down the lawn, as usual?"

Struck by the woman's persistence, Neria looked steadily in her face an instant.

"Is there any reason why I may not go out? Has Mr. Gordon instructed you never to lose sight of me?"

"Not that," came the hesitating reply. "But—"

"What did he say?"

"He would prefer that you did not go out unattended while he is away."

Neria's heart throbbed a little faster. What was the significance of instructions like these coming from her husband?

"There is no danger," she said, lightly, gathering up her shawl. "I shall not be long away."

Mrs. Drury looked as though she would have barred the passage out had she dared. "I could do no less than make Mr. Gordon's wishes known," she said, falling back a step.

Neria passed on, feeling curious and uncertain. Why should she not go out freely, at that hour of the morning, if so disposed? There was not the least impropriety in doing so.

Deeply absorbed in these self-communings, she took no note of time, but awakened suddenly out of a reverie to find herself in one of the crowded squares, a long distance from home, in the midst of the changeable stream of humanity flowing by.

Presently her attention was drawn to a handsome private carriage standing before one of the fashionable shops. As she gazed a lady, closely veiled, but elegantly dressed, descended to the walk. Neria felt her heart thrill strangely, for there was something strikingly familiar in the lady's air and bearing.

The next instant a gentleman advanced, took the lady's arm, and lifting her into the carriage with an unmistakable air of proprietorship, seated himself beside her.

Neria stood like a statue. Her heart gave one great, tumultuous throb, as though about to burst from its confines, then lay still and pulseless in her breast.

That man was her recreant husband, Lawrence Gordon!

The carriage rolled away before she could either speak or stir. Its occupants had not observed her, and knew nothing of the wild, woe-filled gaze that followed them as long as they remained in sight.

Something in the little scene told its own story. Neria did not scream or faint, but putting both hands to her forehead in a weary gesture, leaned trembling against the iron railing near which she had paused.

A brief interval elapsed, then she heard a kind voice say close beside her:

"Hallo, miss! You must be ill. Let me lead you out of this crowd."

She shook her head. "I shall be better soon."

"Don't be too sure of that. Wait a moment. I will call a carriage, and you can go wherever you please."

A little later she found herself resting on the soft cushions. She had just strength enough left to tell the driver where to go, then fell back in a state of semi-unconsciousness.

It gave Mrs. Drury quite a start to see her young mistress brought home in this condition.

"Something dreadful has happened," she said to herself. "Mr. Gordon will be very angry when he knows of this."

The woman got her into the house, drew an easy-chair up to the grate, brought cushions and hassocks and warm, stimulating drinks, doing all that was possible to revive the heart-broken wife. Nevertheless she lay like one dead, with her eyes shut, and scarce a flutter stirring her cold bosom. Mrs. Drury dared not question her; she could only stupidly wonder what had occurred.

As night fell, Neria revived a little. A faint color came into her cheeks, she grew restless and feverish, and constantly watched the door.

"He will come to-night," she said to herself. "I shall see him again."

She had felt from the first a conviction that all was over. The air with which Lawrence had hung over his companion was too gallant and lover-like to have no particular meaning.

"He could not remain with me," Neria thought, bitterly. "But he has time enough to devote to this other woman. My God! what does it mean? He loves her—I read it in his face. This, this is the secret of his coldness and indifference."

About nine o'clock there came a step outside, and the bell rung. Neria waited quite calmly for Mrs. Drury to let her husband in. She was astonished at her own composure. She did not even look up as he came swiftly to her side.

"Is it you?" she said, declining by a gesture his outstretched hand. "Sit down; I was expecting you."

Lawrence stared. Was this really his loving little Neria who had received him so coldly? "She is vexed with me for remaining away so long," he thought.

"I am not very strong," Neria said, after a pause. "The least excitement upsets me. Will you be good enough to tell me at once your object in coming here to-night?"

"To see you, of course, my dear." Looking at her closely now, he noticed her changed appearance for the first time. "In Heaven's name what is the matter, Neria? Have you been seriously ill?"

She made an impatient gesture.

"It is of no consequence. We will speak of other things, if you please. I am afraid we have not thoroughly understood each other in the past. It is time that we did."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "You said when I entered that you had been expecting me. How is that possible, since I sent no word of my coming? Your language is utterly incomprehensible."

Neria laid one hand on her throat as though she felt a suffocating sensation.

"Permit me to explain. This is not the first time to-day I have seen you."

"Not the first time?"

"No. Earlier in the day you were driving with a lady—an intimate friend, I conclude."

She had expected to see him overwhelmed with confusion, but was scarcely prepared for the startling effect of her words. Lawrence fell back, pallid as death, and trembling visibly. For a brief space he had not even the strength to speak.

"It has become necessary to speak very plainly," she went on, her heart beating a little quicker. "I have never complained, and will not do so now. You know as well as I do how much I have borne in silence. But the time has come to assert myself. I am tired of all this secrecy. It must come to an end, Lawrence—for your sake as well as mine. I am resolved to run all risks, and from this time forward take my true position in the world as your wife."

"What will you do?" he cried, springing to his feet with an oath.

"I fancied my meaning was perfectly clear. To please you, my husband, I have kept aloof from society all the months of our married life. Dangers have been incurred, the mere thought of which makes me shudder. But all this must have an end. Your social position is far above what you led me to believe when I became your wife. Doubtless you had some good reason for deceiving me. We will not speak of that. Now that the first glamour of love has worn away, you may even feel some regrets for having linked your destiny with that of a penniless governess. It is too late to give way to any such feeling, Lawrence; I am yours, and you are mine, forever! Forever!"

Her voice softened as she went on, all harshness and coldness melted away. She leaned toward him, stretching out her hands in eager supplication.

"Only love me! I have no life save in you. I should die if you were to turn utterly against me. Don't do it, Lawrence! Bear with me a little. I will be to you the best, truest wife-man ever had. Only return a little of the affection I am lavishing so freely."

She fell on the floor at his feet, and wound her arms tightly about his knees.

"How strangely you look at me, Lawrence! Don't, don't! It curdles the blood in my veins. What have I ever done to forfeit your affection? Is it to my parentage you object? My family is as good as your own. There is nothing for

which I need blush. I can meet your proud mother without shrinking. Come, let us go to her at once. I realize the terrible danger into which you are drifting. You must acknowledge me before all the world—nothing else will save you."

She paused, weak and exhausted with the violence of her emotions. Lawrence tore himself roughly from her clinging arms.

"Have you concluded?" he said, in a hissing whisper.

"Yes."

"Then I have a word to add. It was my intention to break the truth to you gradually. You have only yourself to blame for precipitating its disclosure. It was a false move to think to take the leadership into your own hands. No one save yourself will be injured by your folly."

The words fell on her heart like a blow. His very looks frightened and appalled her.

"What do you mean?" she panted.

"I will tell you. It will be a relief to throw off the last vestige of disguise. Know then that the time for acknowledging you to the world as my wife will never come! You have no such claim upon me. The ceremony by which I won you was utterly void and illegal. I did not know it at the time, but learned the fact afterward. I am as free from all ties, so far as you are concerned, as I was the day we first met."

Neria made no response. She could not. She sat for a moment as though slowly turning to stone. Even her lips seemed to be frozen together.

Misled by her silence, Lawrence resumed in a kinder tone of voice:

"I am glad you are not disposed to take your situation to heart. That would be useless. Of course I mean to provide handsomely for you. I am already negotiating for the purchase of this cottage, and shall settle it upon you with a sufficient income. But you and I must part—"

The sentence was never finished, for with a wild, agonizing cry she fell at his feet, insensible.

Poor soul! Her worst fears had never pointed to anything so horrible as the truth. Even the insinuations of Mrs. Gross, and the heartless manner in which Lawrence had deserted her, had only aroused vague and momentary feelings of distrust. Seeing him that morning in the presence of her unknown rival, she had feared that his allegiance might wander, his affections become estranged.

That was all. The validity of her own claims she did not question. The blow he had dealt well-nigh killed her. Lawrence himself felt frightened as he bent above the rigid body of his victim.

"Poor child! I am really sorry for her," he thought.

But he detested anything like a scene. Calling hurriedly to Mrs. Drury, he helped place the unconscious girl on the sofa.

"Do what you can for your mistress," he said, pushing a few crumpled bank-notes into the woman's hand. "Call in medical aid if necessary, though it is probably a mere fainting-fit. I can be of no use here, and might as well go at once."

And without even glancing again at the hapless young creature whose life he had ruthlessly ruined and blighted, the heartless wretch left the house.

CHAPTER VII.

DOUBLY DECEIVED.

When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions. —SHAKESPEARE.

SOME blows fall with such crushing force it is difficult to believe in their reality. Thus it was in Neria's case. During the long watches of that terrible night, after consciousness returned, she continually asked herself if it was not all a hideous dream. Was it really she who had been so woefully deceived? Had Lawrence really come and gone, and spoken the cruel words to which she had listened?

At last, long after morning dawned, her mind began to clear, and she was able to think connectedly.

The uncertainty and suspense were over at last. All doubt had been removed. The mask had fallen from the face of the man she loved, and she saw him revealed in all his hideousness.

He had not told her what circumstances rendered their marriage null and illegal. He might have failed to comply with some necessary conditions, and invalidated it in that way; or the ceremony itself might have been a mock-

ery. What did it matter? The result was the same in either case, and she a lost woman.

"Lawrence's stories about his mother's illness were base fabrications—idle excuses to put me off," she thought. "How weak I was to be deceived by such hypocrisy! All these weeks he has been paving the way for a final separation—studying how to get rid of me with the least trouble. Oh, my God! my God!"

She could not weep, the solace of tears was denied her. But her heart bled.

"I see how it is," she went on. "The lady with whom he was driving yesterday has supplanted me in his affections. He is anxious to make her his wife. He hung over her like an ardent lover. Perhaps—perhaps—" shuddering, and clasping her hands as a sudden thought struck terror to her soul—"they are married already!"

The bare idea sufficed to arouse all her slumbering energies. During Mrs. Drury's temporary absence from the room, she arose and dressed with feverish haste.

"The lady must be good and kind. I will go to her, and tell her my simple story," she said, with sudden resolution. "She will not refuse to listen. Treacherously as Lawrence has dealt with me I love him yet. I am his wife in the sight of Heaven, and no other woman can hold that relation to him while I live. I will tell my rival so. I will ask her to give up him I love. She will do it—she cannot turn a deaf ear to my prayers. Even Lawrence must pity me. He will return to his old allegiance, and I may be happy yet."

Filled with this hopeful thought—a mad one, alas!—she tied on her bonnet with trembling fingers and went out.

The streets were filled with the usual bustling crowd, but Neria hurried on without glancing to the right or left. She had gone some distance when a heavy hand fell suddenly upon her arm. Mrs. Drury stood close beside her, crimson and out of breath.

"Mercy!" panted the woman. "How fast you walk. I could scarcely overtake you. Where are you going?"

Neria tried to draw away, but made no response.

"Come back," pleaded the woman. "Do come, miss, I am afraid. You are not fit to be on the streets like this. You—you will destroy yourself! For God's sake return with me, and think better of your mad design!"

Mrs. Drury's terror was not assumed. She was a shrewd woman, and though not entirely in her employer's confidence, for some time she had had an inkling of the true state of affairs. Every day in the week the crime of self-murder is committed for less troubles than that which had overtaken poor Neria.

"Come back. Do come!" she entreated. The unhappy one turned on her with an indignant look.

"Let me alone," she said. "By what right do you detain me thus? I have no thought of destroying myself—not the least."

"Are you sure, miss? Oh, it is dreadful for you to be wandering about by yourself after being so ill."

"I have a visit to make. Let go my arm, if you please. We are wasting precious time."

Mrs. Drury reluctantly released her hold, not more than half convinced, and Neria dashed away.

She had no very clear idea how to find the lady of whom she was in search. She did not even know whether she was a resident of the city or only a transient visitor. She was ignorant of her name, and not having seen her face, might pass her on the street a dozen times without suspecting her identity. It seemed like a hopeless quest.

"What am I to do?" she asked herself, a feeling of utter despair coming over her.

Lawrence was probably still in the city. The only feasible plan that suggested itself was to find him, and, painful as the interview might be, learn through his instrumentality the whereabouts of the person in question.

Hailing a cab, she drove at once to the hotel where she had found Lawrence on first coming to the city, and called for the hotel register. It was laid before her, and she ran her eyes hastily over the list of arrivals for the previous day.

Lawrence Gordon's name was not recorded among the rest.

"He is stopping at some other hotel," she thought. "I will go the rounds."

She did so, everywhere meeting with the same result. She even made inquiries, but no one could give her any information of such a person. At length, wearied out with the fruitlessness of her efforts, she retraced her steps to the first place visited.

"I wish to communicate with Mr. Lawrence Gordon, and have lost his address," she said to the clerk, noticing his surprised look at her reappearance. "Be good enough to inform me when he was last here."

"I do not know any one by that name, madam," was the answer.

"You do—you must!" came the eager exclamation. "Think again. Mr. Gordon always stopped here during his infrequent visits to the city."

The man gravely shook his head.

"Then it must have been before my time, madam, and I have been here two years."

Neria drew a startled breath. The insinuation Mrs. Gross had made long before, that Gordon might be a fictitious name, instantly suggested itself to her mind.

"Let me see the register again," she cried, her heart beating and her brain reeling.

She knew the date of Lawrence's first secret flight, and hastily turned back to it. The page was well filled with names, but that for which she looked did not anywhere appear.

"Thank you," she said, in a husky voice, pushing back the book. "I will not trouble you further."

The conviction was forcing its way home to her unwilling mind that Lawrence had deceived her in respect to his name as in all things else. She had not even a clew by which to trace him.

Nearer dead than alive she made her way back to the little cottage that was now her only home. Mrs. Drury stood in the door, anxiously watching for her reappearance.

"How long you were," said the woman, breathing a sigh of relief. "I had given up all expectation of seeing you again. Poor child, you look like death. Come in and lie down. I know you are in trouble, but you will feel better by and by. One can learn to bear almost anything."

Neria made no response. Her temples were throbbing frightfully, and once having gained her room she fell upon the bed, and buried her forehead in the pillow.

What remained to be done? It seemed more than probable that Lawrence had left the city, and perhaps taken away with him the woman he loved. There was no longer any present possibility of appealing to the sympathy of her unknown rival.

"Heaven help me," moaned the poor creature, "or I shall go mad."

What was to become of her in this distressing strait? In point of fact she was both nameless and homeless. Nameless, for she had no right to the title she had once worn with such tender pride—homeless, because she would sooner have begged or starved than remain indebted for the food she ate and the roof that sheltered her to him who had basely deserted her.

"I must leave here at once—make my own way in the world," she thought. "But where, where shall I go? Where hide my shame and misery? And who will take me in?"

The thought of her early friends—those from whom she had been so long estranged—was first to suggest itself. It would bring greater comfort than anything else to seek a reconciliation, and be able to throw herself upon their compassion.

But pride rebelled.

"Never, no, never!" she cried. "That happiness is denied me. I am under a ban. The trouble that has overtaken me shuts me out forever from the society of all I have ever known. I cannot go back to the dear ones who once loved me, with such a sad, shameful, terrible story."

Gradually, as she reflected, a longing to hide herself somewhere in the great city of New York, took possession of her mind. It might have been because that was Lawrence's home, and she could still be near him, barren comfort though this would be, or simply because in a vast metropolis she could hope to lose her identity more effectually than elsewhere. She did not stop to analyze the feeling, but simply gave way to it.

"I will go now, this very night," she resolved.

Reason told her it would not be well to acquaint Mrs. Drury with this determination. She waited until nearly midnight, when the house was still and the good woman wrapped in repose. Gathering up a few little trinkets, and putting some money in her purse, she went forth to the new, untried life before her.

Little did she dream how full it was destined to be of adventure and strange complications, such as sometimes, but not often, fall to one's lot!

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW HOME AND A NEW NAME.

Oh, it was pitiful!

Near a whole city full,

Home she had none.

—HOOD.

In the gray light of early dawn Neria reached New York.

The dreary night journey had seemed like a dream. She was only vaguely conscious of being whirled along hour after hour, at a tremendous rate of speed. Her temples were throbbing, her lips parched, and she felt an almost intolerable pain in her side. Even her hands were dry and burning hot.

It was with a terrible sense of isolation that she stole forth from the railway terminus into the unfamiliar streets of the great city. For her there were no pleasant smiles of welcome, or tender words of greeting. Homeless, friendless, well-nigh penniless, she was like a waif stranded on a strange shore.

She wandered on, aimlessly and recklessly, her brain in a wild whirl. People turned to look at her as she passed, and once a pleasant-faced lady inquired if she were ill. Neria did not even hear the question. She felt dead and benumbed mentally, only alive to physical pain.

At length she reached the Park. It was now past ten o'clock. Utterly worn out, she could scarcely drag one limb after the other. She threw herself, half-fainting, into one of the rustic chairs.

What followed she could never clearly recall. She seemed to wake up out of a lethargy to find a tall, handsome, noble-looking man standing beside her, tightly grasping her arms.

"What is the matter?" she heard the gentleman say. "Try to rouse yourself sufficiently to tell me."

She lifted her dazed eyes to his face, but made no response.

"I wish to know who you are that I may take you to your friends," he persisted.

The last word riveted Neria's attention for a moment.

"Friends?" she repeated. "Friends? Who are they?"

"That is what I wish to discover. Pray tell me."

No answer. She closed her eyes, and sunk again into a state of semi-unconsciousness.

"Poor thing," said the man. "She is going to be very ill. What a pretty face, only so full of sorrow! It is a pity she can tell me nothing of her friends. I dislike to send her to a hospital."

He reflected a moment, and finally walked a few steps down the path to where a carriage stood waiting in the drive.

"Follow me, James," he said to the footman.

"I have found a young lady who is ill and delirious. I will take her home with me until we can hear tidings of her friends."

Neria was dimly conscious of being borne to the carriage by friendly hands; then all was a blank.

Many days and weeks had gone by before she awakened again to full consciousness of her own existence.

She found herself lying on a daintily-draped couch in a pleasant chamber. A small table, littered with vials and medicine glasses, stood near. The bed was near the window, the curtains of which had been drawn apart. With her head resting upon the pillow, Neria could see the landscape stretching below.

She started, pressed her hand wildly to her forehead. The hills and valleys were covered with a white mantle like a shroud! She had gone to sleep, as it were, with all the glories of autumn about her, and now it seemed to be mid-winter, or nearly so.

The door opened, Neria heard footsteps approaching the bed. "Oh, Gilbert!" a soft voice exclaimed, in a delighted whisper, "there has been a change! I do believe the poor girl has come to her right mind at last!"

"Hush!" came the warning answer. "Do not startle the child."

Neria turned her gaze full upon the speakers. She saw the same handsome gentleman whose face she remembered in the Park, and a lady several years older than himself, but closely resembling him, who was evidently his sister.

"Where am I?" she asked, in a weak voice.

"With those who will take good care of you," the lady answered, coming nearer, and speaking in a tone of repressed excitement. "Do not be alarmed, or borrow any trouble."

"Who brought me here?"

"My brother. He found you in the Park, sick and delirious. We did not know where to find your friends, and have cared for you ourselves."

Tears stood in Neria's eyes. She put up her hand to brush them away, and then noticed for the first time how thin, white and wasted it was.

"I must have been ill a long while," she said. "Yes, many weeks," was the answer. "But you are not to talk about it now, or excite yourself. You are still very weak."

"What is the name of this place?"

"Cragnest. It belongs to my brother, Gilbert Brandon. I am Mrs. Charlton. That is all you need know for the present. We will talk more about it when you are stronger."

Neria took unquestioningly the composing draught that was now placed at her lips. Somehow she felt a deep sense of peace and security, as though she were homeless and friendless no longer.

Mr. Brandon had not joined at all in the brief conversation, but Neria read the deepest interest and sympathy in his earnest gaze.

The next day she felt better and stronger. Awakening from a refreshing sleep to find Mrs. Charlton sitting alone beside the couch, she said eagerly:

"Has any one been here to ask after me?"

"No," the lady answered. "We advertised in the papers, but there was no response. Your friends have utterly lost sight of you."

Neria remained silent for some time, with her face turned to the wall. What had occurred during the long weeks while she had lain unconscious? Was Lawrence lost to her forever? Had he well-nigh forgotten her already, and married her unknown rival?

Her brain whirled so wildly at the thought she could scarcely refrain from crying outright. Oh, why had not God been merciful and permitted her to die at the very outset of her illness?

Mrs. Charlton's voice, full of affection and sympathy, aroused her from these bitter reflections.

"Perhaps there is some person for whom you would like to send, my dear? If so, you have only to give me the name and address, and I will communicate with them at once."

Neria started, and felt the heavy drops gather on her forehead.

"No, no," she said. "You are very kind—you have only been too good to me. But there is no one I wish to see—not one!"

"Have you no mother—no sisters?" Mrs. Charlton asked, looking at her in a bewildered way.

"They think me dead, no doubt, and have forgotten me. I am dead—to them."

"How strangely you talk. Some great trouble must have befallen you."

"Yes," Neria answered, casting down her gaze. "So great the only wonder is that I am still alive."

Mrs. Charlton's countenance betrayed perplexity and curiosity. It was only natural that she should wonder what had so blighted the life of one so young and beautiful.

"Poor child," she said. "One of these days you shall tell me something of your history. I know from your looks it must be a very sad one. But we will wait until you are stronger. All I desire just now is to know by what name to address you."

Neria hesitated. What should she say—she who was without a name she could rightfully call her own?

"You may call me perdu," she said, very low; adding to herself: "Perdu means lost; and so am I—lost to peace and happiness forevermore."

Mrs. Charlton did not quite catch the words. "Perdy?" she repeated. "I have heard that name before."

Neria suffered the mistake to pass without correction. After all, what did it matter? It was years since she had been called by any name to which she had a better right. Even when Lawrence found her she had been passing under an *alias* the more fully to sever all connection between herself and the friends from whom she had become estranged.

Thus it was that our hapless heroine became known to her new associates simply as "Miss Perdy."

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERY IN THE HOUSE.

Oh, mischief! thou art swift

To enter in the thoughts of desperate men!

—SHAKESPEARE.

DAYS wore on, and Neria began slowly to convalesce.

When she was able to sit up a few hours at a time, it was Gilbert Brandon who kept her

company even more frequently than did his sister. He had taken a deep interest in the young girl from the first. Her beauty, apparent friendlessness, and settled sadness, appealed strongly to his sensibilities, and fastened a strong hold upon his heart. He felt an instinctive longing to succor and comfort her.

At first he brought favorite authors, and simply read aloud while she listened. Gradually they began to talk about passages that both admired, and were often surprised to find their tastes singularly in harmony. It finally happened that the book would be left behind more frequently than otherwise, and they spent the whole hour in pleasant conversation.

Neria never thought it possible that harm could result from these interviews. The kindness of these new-found friends gave her fresh hope and courage. The world seemed a brighter and better place than formerly, and she became almost reconciled to existence. Ah, how different her life might have been with such influences continually thrown around her!

On one occasion, when he was rising to leave after an unusually pleasant interview, Neria extended her hand impulsively and said:

"How can I ever repay you and Mrs. Charlton for your many kindnesses to me?"

"Do not speak of them," he answered.

"There is nothing you need to remember."

"I must leave you soon, and it will be a great grief to bid adieu to such pleasant associations."

She spoke frankly, under the impulse of the moment, and was surprised to see him start and lose color.

"Leave us?"

"Yes," she replied. "I shall soon be well and strong again. I am now gaining rapidly."

"But why need you go away?"

She lifted her eyes in amazement at the question.

"Why? Because I have trespassed too long already upon your kindness. My only claim upon you is the common one of humanity. Besides, I have my own way to make in the world. It will never do to remain idle too long. I ought to begin looking for a situation without delay."

A brief silence fell, during which Gilbert Brandon seemed to be reflecting.

"What can you do?" he asked, at length.

"That is, what do you wish to do?"

"I have lived as governess in two or three families already. I can do that again, or find a situation as 'companion' to some elderly lady."

No more was said at the time. But the next day Mrs. Charlton came to Neria and said:

"Gilbert and I have been discussing your affairs. Cragnest is a large house; there are no near neighbors, and the city is several miles away. I am often lonely during my brother's frequent absences from home. We have often talked of bringing some cheerful young person into the house, just to keep me company. How would you like to remain in that capacity?"

Neria's eyes filled with tears, it was so much better than anything she had expected. What a relief still to remain under that happy, peaceful roof!

"How good you are!" she uttered. "But I fear you have made a want just to oblige me."

"Oh, no. And what if I had? It is really myself who will be accommodated. I receive but little company and should miss you sadly were you to go away. Nothing would suit me better than to keep you with me for the present. You will stay?"

Of course Neria consented. She even felt grateful to Heaven for opening up such an opportunity; for no inward voice whispered a friendly warning of the frightful peril into which she was rushing unwittingly.

Several more weeks went by, and as Neria's health was now completely restored, she had left her invalid-chamber for good, and entered upon the discharge of her new duties.

These did not prove very onerous. She had no reply to answer Mrs. Charlton's letters, read to her, or exert herself to be entertaining and agreeable whenever her benefactress betrayed a desire for companionship.

Cragnest was a commodious country-house built on the hills, overlooking the Hudson. Neria had not mingled freely with the family many days before she discovered that even this beautiful home had its skeleton. One wing of the mansion was shut up, and even the servants shook their heads and looked grave whenever it was mentioned.

Mrs. Charlton's fair brow was often wrinkled with anxious care, and Gilbert Brandon's handsome face wore an expression of settled melan-

choly, as though he had drank deep of the cup of sorrow.

"Why is it?" Neria asked herself, wonderingly. "Is there nowhere an Eden that grief and suffering have not invaded?"

At last there came a time when she was destined to learn more of this secret trouble. On her way to her chamber, one night, a random gust of wind, apparently from an open window, suddenly extinguished the wax taper she carried. Hesitating an instant, undecided whether to go on or turn back, she heard the soft patter of naked feet on the floor, and all at once something shadowy and dark sprang upon her with a strange cry, between a shriek and a snarl of rage.

Poor Neria was dreadfully frightened. A scream of terror broke from her lips, and she struggled frantically to break away from the vise-like grasp that held her fast. Despite every effort, however, the claw-like fingers that clutched her throat closed upon it so tightly her brain reeled, and she was almost suffocated.

This deadly peril lasted but a moment. There came a rush of footsteps along the corridor, and Gilbert Brandon appeared, bringing a light.

Neria saw him rush to her rescue; then, for a few seconds, she knew nothing more.

When consciousness fully returned, she found herself alone, sitting close to the wall, her head resting against a chair. Smothered sounds could be heard proceeding from a narrow corridor that, branching off to the left, led to the shut-up wing—threats, entreaties, plaintive cries, and an indescribable blending of sounds as though all the fiends of torment had been suddenly let loose and were doing their worst.

"What can be the meaning of all this?" she thought, leaning forward with clasped hands and a wildly beating heart.

Mr. Brandon's voice came indistinctly to her ears for an instant. He was speaking in the coaxing, supplicating accents one employs with a wayward child, but the words were inaudible. Finally a door closed in the distance, and even these sounds died away.

Neria sat motionless, her eyes dilated with terror. After a long interval there came a glimmer of light at the far-end of the corridor, and Mr. Brandon swiftly approached. He was as pale as death, the muscles about his mouth twitching convulsively.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, coming close to her side.

"No, only frightened," she answered, speaking with great difficulty.

A smothered exclamation broke from his lips.

"I am tempted sometimes beyond my powers of endurance. Ah, what if that fiend had done you serious harm?"

"Who was it?" Neria whispered, clinging convulsively to his arm. "What was it?"

"A devil," he answered, with a hoarse sigh. She lifted her eyes wonderingly to his face.

"You doubt it?" he rejoined, in answer to that look. "Wait until you have reached my age, and had my experience. Did you think the time had gone by when mortals are tormented with devils?"

"I do not understand you, Mr. Brandon."

"No matter. I am often at a loss to comprehend myself. But enough of that. Thank Heaven you have escaped uninjured. I can think of nothing else."

As he stooped to raise her in his arms, Neria was surprised to find him trembling like a leaf, and his forehead covered with heavy drops.

"Something dreadful has happened—I am sure of it!" she panted.

"No, nothing that might not have been expected. But this night's incident shall be a warning to me. Lean on my arm, child. You looked like a crushed lily a moment since. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes."

"It is well. I will see you to the door of your chamber. These corridors are not safe for you after nightfall, it appears."

Neria followed on, filled with vague wonder. She still hoped he would offer some explanation of the strange episode, but such was not his intention. Placing his own lamp in her hand, he said in an earnest voice at parting:

"Take my advice, child, and lock your chamber door. Lock it securely. Never trust yourself a moment in any other way. Good-night."

Sleep had been banished from Neria's pillow by what had occurred. She tossed restlessly for hours, pondering the strange mystery, but unable to arrive at a satisfactory solution. She could not divine who the strange being by whom she had been assaulted could be.

The next morning she felt sorely tempted to question Mrs. Charlton, but was at a loss how to begin. The peculiar way in which the lady looked at her when they first met, plainly indicated that she knew all. They were sitting together after breakfast—a meal from which Mr. Brandon had absented himself, by the way—when Neria abruptly said:

"You have never told me, madam, why the north wing was shut up."

"The remainder of the house is sufficient for present use," was the quiet answer. "We do not wish to be burdened with the care of so much."

"It appears to be the finest portion of the house."

"Yes, some of the rooms are very beautiful."

"Some day I would like to explore them, if you have no objection," Neria said, wistfully, unwilling to let the subject drop.

Mrs. Charlton wrinkled her brows in some thing like a frown.

"You would find nothing of interest, my dear. Indeed, the less you have to do with that wing the better. Pray do not allude to it again."

Neria smothered a sigh of disappointment. She waited impatiently for Mr. Brandon to appear, hoping he might volunteer information on the perplexing subject. He did not make the least allusion to it, however, or show by his manner that anything unusual had occurred.

Everything went on quietly for several days. The only perceptible difference was shown in the deeper solicitude for the girl's comfort that Mr. Brandon manifested, and the fact that she was never permitted to move about the house at night unattended.

One morning Neria had left the house for a solitary ramble in the grounds, and was passing the north wing, when she heard a strange, discordant noise above her head, and on looking up beheld a wild, woeful face glued for an instant against the glass.

Such a terrible face! The mere sight of it was enough to curdle the blood in Neria's veins, and when a torrent of curses and angry vituperations broke from the bloodless lips, she shrunk back appalled.

Only a chance word now and then reached the girl's ears, but she was completely unnerved. Rallying her failing courage at last by a terrible effort she rushed on to a sort of observatory that had been built close to the edge of the precipice, and climbing the stairs, threw herself breathlessly into a seat.

What had she beheld?—what discovery made? Who was the mysterious being imprisoned in the shut-up chambers of the north wing?

For some time she sat motionless, revolving these questions in her mind. Suddenly the little octagon chamber in which she sat began filling with smoke. It was quite dense, almost stiflingly so, before she noticed it at all in her preoccupation. As she started up in alarm, the sharp, crackling sound of flames smote upon her ears.

The truth flashed upon her mind at once. The building was on fire!

It had been erected to look down upon the river, and was only open on that side. Below was a sheer descent of a hundred feet. Escape in that direction was impossible. Neria rushed to the door. Some one had stolen up behind her, closing and locking it on the other side!

The cry of uncontrollable terror that rose to her lips as she made this discovery was echoed by a mocking voice without!

CHAPTER X.

TORTURED HEARTS.

It wounds, indeed,
To bear affronts too great to be forgiven,
And not have power to punish. —DRYDEN.

NERIA instantly comprehended the extent of her peril. It was the unknown inmate of the north wing who had stolen forth, locked her into the upper chamber of the observatory, and kindled a fire in the lower room, with the terrible purpose of roasting her alive!

She did not stop to ask herself what could have been the motive impelling to such a deed. The danger was too imminent. Beating her clinched fists against the door, she shrieked loudly for succor.

"Scream away!" cried the jeering voice below. "It will not avail. Every sound of agony makes my heart dance with joy. Ashes to ashes! In a few moments nothing will be left of your fatal beauty save a few charred and blackened bones!"

Neria sickened with horror. Was there no

escape? Must she indeed die miserably like this a terrible, agonizing death? Weary as she had grown of existence, it was dreadful to end it so tragically.

"Help me, oh, Father in heaven!" she cried, with pallid lips. "Do not let me perish thus!"

That prayer was answered. Hurried footsteps crossed the lawn, and she heard Mr. Brandon's voice, as he addressed a few words to the would-be murderer in accents of blended anger and sorrow.

"What new madness is this, Fedora? Why is it that you take such pleasure in destroying? Life and property are no longer safe where you are. You will yet compel me to deal severely with you. It is a mystery how you managed to escape again!"

"My master, the devil, helped me," came the cunning rejoinder.

"I believe he did. But you must come back with me at once. It is not prudent to leave you at large. Come, that's a good soul, Fedora."

The tone was persuasive, such as one might use to an irresponsible child. The woman laughed shrilly as she made response:

"I am ready. Let us go quickly, Gilbert. The old tower is of no consequence; let it burn! It has long been an eyesore—a blot upon the landscape. Come, come! I wish to be locked up. Make haste, before my mood changes, and the devil gets hold of me again."

She was doing her best to hurry him away. Poor Neria, whose hearing seemed almost painfully acute at that trying moment, had caught every word. Mr. Brandon did not suspect her presence in that living tomb! He was going away—leaving her to perish!

The thought called back her ebbing strength. Again rushing to the door she beat upon it with both hands, screaming in accents of awful terror:

"Help, help! For God's sake do not leave me here to be burned alive!"

That cry was heard. Heavy footsteps came bounding up the stairs—the door was burst in with one determined blow, and Gilbert Brandon sprang across the threshold, letting in a cloud of smoke and a torrent of hot, stifling air.

"Who calls?" he cried, unable to see anything for a moment in the thick atmosphere. "Surely I heard a voice."

Then his glance fell upon Neria. She was crouching on the floor, almost at his feet, faint and giddy with terror. Uttering a wild cry, he caught her up, and drew her with a frantic gesture to his breast.

"Neria! Oh, my God! This is too dreadful!"

The next instant he was raining hot kisses on her lips, her cheek, her bright brown hair. All the mad love that had lain crushed in his heart for many days, found expression in that moment of terrible anguish. He clasped her in his arms, laid his cheek against hers, murmured a thousand words of passionate endearment.

"Oh, my love, my love! If that fiend had succeeded in her purpose, I would have perished with you."

Neria felt dazed and bewildered. She could not even struggle in that strong, breathless embrace. She lay helpless in his arms while he made his way slowly down the staircase. It was already crumbling away. The flames had caught the baluster, and more than once the terrified girl felt their hot breath scorching her cheek. The descent had barely been accomplished when the stairs fell with a loud crash.

Outside stood the mad, gibbering creature who had wrought this work of destruction. Neria caught one glimpse of the wild, livid face, and eyes burning with a lurid light, then fainted away.

She was lying on the sofa in the back parlor when she recovered. Mrs. Charlton stood over her with a bottle of smelling-salts, pale as death, with tears streaming down her face.

"The fire!" Neria panted, starting up, and failing to realize at once her changed situation. "It is coming nearer! My God, I shall be burned alive!"

Mrs. Charlton laid her hand on the girl's burning brow, trying to soothe her.

"Be calm, dear child. You were in danger, but it is over now. There is nothing to fear. Do you not see that this is the old, familiar room where we have spent so many happy hours, and that I am here beside you?"

"I do now. But I was half-crazed with terror. Oh, it was dreadful!"

She hid her face in her hands, at the thought of the peril she had escaped, and shuddered convulsively.

"That woman saw me enter the tower," she

added, after a thoughtful pause. "She was at one of the windows in the north wing when I went by. Of course she followed me, and set fire to the building for the sole purpose of destroying me. What have I ever done to gain her enmity? Oh, why did she do it, Mrs. Charlton? Why did she?"

"The poor creature is mad—not accountable for her own acts," was the answer.

"But, why has she selected me to vent her malice upon? There must be some reason. The mystery of the north wing is partially clear to my mind. This madwoman is shut up there. It was she who assaulted me once before. She seems to feel particularly malignant toward me. Why is it, Mrs. Charlton? I think you could explain the riddle—if so disposed."

Mrs. Charlton flushed a little, but shook her head.

"It is useless trying to account for the vagaries of the insane. Pray think no more about the matter, poor child. All danger is over. My brother and I will see to it that you are exposed to no further risks."

"But who is that dreadful woman?"

The reply came after a hesitating pause.

"A friendless soul my brother shelters out of pity. There is no one else to take an interest in her. I regret exceedingly that she has crossed your path. I hoped to keep you ignorant of her very existence. The servants know that she inhabits the north wing, but they are pledged to secrecy; and no one outside our little household ever suspects the facts."

Neria lifted her eyes in a perplexed look.

"I do not know why she should be shut up like a prisoner."

"Because it is dangerous for her to run at large. You can see that for yourself. And there is another reason for the course we pursue—one quite as potent as the first."

Glancing quickly round the room, Mrs. Charlton drew nearer, and added in suppressed tones: "You are such a sensible person, Miss Perdy, I am tempted to tell you more. I know you can be trusted with a secret. That unfortunate woman has been guilty of a great crime! I need not recount the circumstances connected with it. They are too horrible for me to touch upon. All that has kept Fedora from being incarcerated within the gloomy walls of a prison is the fact that the authorities are ignorant of her existence. It is generally believed that she perished in an accident, years ago. Gilbert and I have kept her secreted here ever since. You may imagine, words cannot describe, what a burden she has been to us."

Mrs. Charlton sighed heavily, the old look of anxious care that Neria remembered so well reappearing in her face.

"It would be cruel to punish one in her condition," the young girl said. "If told the truth, I am sure the authorities would do no worse than send the poor creature to an asylum."

Mrs. Charlton shook her head.

"At times Fedora is as rational as either you or I. It would be no easy matter to have her adjudged insane. Besides, Gilbert will not run the risk. It is a terrible thing for him—"

She broke off abruptly, a flush rising to her brow.

"I must not talk so much. You have been told all that is necessary."

A step now sounded outside the door. Mrs. Charlton turned hastily. "It is my brother," she said. "He is very anxious about you, dear. I shall tell him he may come in."

She was gone before Neria could interpose. The startled girl sat up, trembling from head to foot, her face suffused with blushes. All at once she remembered the mad words to which she had listened, the caresses she had received. Gladly would she have given worlds, had they been at her command, to be spared the ordeal of a meeting after what had transpired!

Mr. Brandon advanced slowly into the room. He had evidently schooled himself to calmness; his face, though very pale, was grave and almost stern in its expression.

"I am glad to find you so much better, Miss Perdy," he said, very quietly. "It was a narrow escape; I shudder to think of it."

The words were such as he might have addressed to a stranger. Just then he ventured to look at her for the first time. Had her manner been composed, like his own, all might have been well. But her blushes and embarrassment utterly broke him down.

"Neria! Oh, my darling!" he cried, flinging himself on his knees before her. "Is it possible that my love is returned? Ah, this is more than I expected!"

No wonder he was deceived. Even when the

startled girl drew back, livid and gasping, every particle of color gone from her lovely face, he failed to comprehend the real state of her feelings.

"My own love!" he gasped, as though the words were torn, in spite of every effort, from his unwilling lips. "After all I have suffered I am vouchsafed one glimpse of paradise. This moment is at once the happiest and the bitterest of my whole life. I love you, and you love me in return! Though you are lost to me forever, there is ecstasy in the thought!"

Neria put up her hand to stop him. She had turned sick with terror and anguish.

"Hush!" she breathed. "You do not know what you are saying. Never, never speak to me like that again!"

"I did not intend to speak now," he answered, his face distorted with suffering. "God forgive me! I am a wretch. I have no right to utter such words to any woman. Oh, what have I done? How could I so far forget myself?"

And he struck both hands against his forehead with a gesture of intolerable anguish.

CHAPTER XI.

REVELATIONS.

Talk not of comfort, 'tis for lighter ills;
I will indulge my sorrows, and give way
To all the pangs and fury of despair.

—ADDISON.

NERIA looked at him a moment in silence. This sudden burst of contrition surprised and startled her. What did it mean? Ignorant as he was of her own history, it could only have reference to himself.

"Leave me, Mr. Brandon," she said, at length, in a faint voice. "You and I can have nothing in common. This scene is too painful to be protracted."

"Do you forgive me?" he asked, huskily, lifting his burning eyes to her face.

"For what?"

"For deceiving you. Of course you have divined the truth—what relation that wretched madwoman bears to me! Oh, it is horrible! I cannot tell you what I have suffered through her. It was a mistake not to have told you all long ago! But I meant no wrong; I did not realize my own weakness, and now it is too late."

There was something appalling in the low cry of agony that broke from his lips.

"I do not understand," faltered Neria. "That woman—why do you speak of her again?"

"Ah, how can I tell you?"

A sudden conviction drove every drop of blood from Neria's heart.

"She is your wife?"

"Yes."

He turned away, and strode up and down the room for a while, his features working convulsively. Then he confronted Neria again. She was sitting motionless as a figure carved in marble, but her eyes were full of a divine compassion as she lifted them to his face.

"I am shocked and grieved by the revelation you have made," she said. "Mrs. Charlton had already told me something of that poor soul—but not all. I pity you. From the depths of my heart I pity you. It must be a terrible thing to be linked by destiny with one like her."

"Then you have forgiven me for suffering my heart to go out in love for you while duty and honor bound me to another?"

As there was no response he went on feverishly:

"I did not realize my own danger until it was too late. Years ago, when this trouble first came upon me, I took up the grievous burden of life, resolved to bear it uncomplainingly to the end. I have so borne it up to the moment you came among us. The shame and torment I suffered were hidden in the recesses of my own heart. I withdrew from the world and devoted myself exclusively to the care of Fedora, shielding her in every possible way. I bore patiently with her ill-temper, waywardness and petty jealousies. No man ever tried harder to do his duty."

"The struggle has well-nigh broken me down, however. I have grown old and gray in the flower of my manhood. Endurance fails, patience is well-nigh worn out. There must be a limit to all things. I was sick and tired of the burden of life long before you came among us, Miss Perdy."

Neria started slightly, as she always did on hearing the false name spoken unexpectedly, but leaned forward in an attitude of silent attention.

"Let me recall for a moment the memorable day when I found you in Central Park," he continued, the muscles about his mouth twitching with pain that could not be suppressed. "Your beauty and helplessness kindled a flame in my breast that has never died out. I brought you here, and awaited with poignant anxiety the result of the illness that followed. I had found a new interest in life. The sight of your fresh young face was a perpetual joy to me. I could have gazed on it forever."

"No suspicion of danger crossed my mind until the night Fedora assaulted you in the corridor. Then I awakened suddenly to a realization of the truth—that I had learned to love you with a mad intensity of which I had deemed myself incapable. I had not the courage to flee from the peril that menaced us both, however. It seemed too dreadful to shut out the only ray of comfort that had fallen upon my solitary life. I imagined myself strong enough to hide my madness in my own heart forever. Oh, fatal mistake! Love like mine can never be suppressed!"

He hid his face in his hands a moment, struggling for self-control.

Neria felt deeply touched. How grand, noble and self-denying this man seemed, even in his sorrow! Unconsciously she compared him with Lawrence, feeling a vague wish that the latter had possessed more of his attributes.

"Perhaps I have said too much," he added, huskily, after a brief pause. "If so, I have only to crave your forgiveness for that, as well as for having loved you. This is the last exhibition of folly to which I shall give way. Hereafter we will be friends. I wish you to forget that this episode ever occurred."

He was turning away, his face full of a yearning sadness; but Neria stopped him by a gesture.

"One moment," she said, with forced calmness. "I have a confession to make in return for yours. If you are guilty, I am immeasurably more so. If you have worn a mask, so have I. If you have hidden in your heart a sorrowful secret that was eating your very life away, I know how to sympathize with you."

"What do you mean? Is it possible—?"

She did not wait for him to continue.

"While I have strength to do so," she resumed, dropping her eyes, "let me tell you why I do not love you, and never could, under any circumstances. My whole heart is given to another! He has proven himself unworthy, it is true, but love is long-suffering! Even the memory of past happiness is sweeter than any present passion could be. Though you were a free man at this moment, I could never be more to you than a friend."

Gilbert Brandon grew very pale. Though conscious that Neria had experienced some bitter trial in her past life, he had never dreamed of this. She had loved, and suffered through that love! Ah, what wretch could be base enough to cost that tender heart a single pang?

"I have deceived you and Mrs. Charlton—the kindest, best friends I ever had," she resumed. "I should have told you all, long ago, but shame sealed my lips. I have no right even to the name I bear."

"No matter," he said, catching his breath. "You must have had good reason for imposing upon us one that is not your own."

"It came about quite by accident, in the first place. I told Mrs. Charlton she might call me perdu—lost. It was a foolish speech, and meant nothing. She failed to catch the word correctly, and ever since I have been known as 'Miss Perdy.' The error was allowed to pass uncorrected. What difference did it make? I do not know myself what name rightfully belongs to me."

Mr. Brandon looked at her in amazement.

"How is that possible?"

"Because I am a disowned wife—or worse than that."

She buried her face upon her arms that she might not see the expression of horror and anguish with which he regarded her.

"Let me tell my story from the beginning," she went on, speaking rapidly, with her face still averted. "Years ago my father's family was one of wealth and influence. Our home was in Washington. We moved in the best social circles of the city. Reverses came, however; we were deprived of everything. My mother died; my father's health failed, and my sister Edna and I were thrown upon our own resources."

"I was scarcely sixteen at the time. Trouble had changed my father's whole nature. He

became exacting and tyrannical. When at length a suitor for my hand appeared in the person of a wealthy old gentleman more than treble my own age, papa would hear to no remonstrance, but commanded me to prepare myself for the marriage without delay.

"I need not dwell upon the scenes that followed. My whole soul rebelled against the unnatural union. Prayers, tears and expostulations were in vain, however. I had my choice to obey, or leave my father's house forever.

"Edna sided with papa. She could not endure a life of poverty, and added to my misery by her reproaches and entreaties. She thought I might sacrifice myself for the common good.

"You divine the result, perhaps. Unable to comply with their wishes, I fled one fatal night from home, and going to another city, obtained a position as governess in a private family. From that day to this I have never entered my father's house or heard one word from him or my sister."

She paused a moment to gather strength. Mr. Brandon stood as if turned to stone, pallid and motionless. The worst was yet to come, and he seemed to divine intuitively the terrible nature of the revelation that awaited him.

Neria's head sunk lower and lower, and it was in a scarcely audible voice that she finished her story.

Very briefly she spoke of the chance meeting with Lawrence Gordon, the sudden passion his handsome face inspired, the rash marriage—or what she took to be one—that followed, the long, happy months of her sojourn at Lake George, and finally of the terrible awakening that came to her brief but happy dream when she learned of her lover's unworthiness, and he had cruelly deserted her.

The wretched man pressed his hands to his temples more than once before she concluded. He had drunk deep of the cup of sorrow already, but never had he experienced a moment so full of agony as this.

"Poor, poor child!" he said, in a hoarse choked voice. "How you have suffered! And I have only added to your misery by my unwarrantable folly."

"Do not reproach yourself; there is no need."

"How can you ever forgive me?"

She raised her head, her beautiful eyes shining upon him full of remorse and contrition.

"It is I who have need of pardon," she said, humbly. "I had no right to enter this house under false pretenses. Had the truth been known, I might not have been harbored here a single day."

"Oh, you would, you would," he answered, earnestly.

"Forgive me for having sullied your beautiful home by my presence. I have been almost happy here. My troubles seemed less inupportable. I could not tear myself away at once. I had suffered so much—the very atmosphere was full of peace."

"Neria—"

She quickly raised her hand.

"Hush! I am not strong as I was once. Please go away. Give me time to reflect calmly upon what has occurred. Then I shall be able to see my way more clearly than at present."

He clasped her passive fingers—even laid them against his cheek for a moment.

"God help you," he said; and so left her.

Neria turned her face to the wall with a long, sobbing sigh. It seemed as though her last friend had gone from her.

"Must I tear myself away from even this refuge?" she murmured. "Oh, it is very hard."

CHAPTER XII.

THE HAND OF FATE.

What fates impose, that men must needs abide;
It boots not to resist both wind and tide.

—SHAKESPEARE.

MORE than an hour went by, and at last a soft, gliding step entered the room, and approached the couch on which Neria was lying.

"Gilbert has told me all," said Mrs. Charlton's low, sweet voice, "and I am here to offer my love and sympathy. Your lot has been a bitter one, poor child."

The girl lifted her streaming eyes to the kind face that bent above her.

"Have you no word of reproach to utter for having deceived you?" she asked. "Not one?"

"Why should I? No one ever inquired very closely into your past history, and it was not to be expected that you would volunteer in-

formation concerning it. The only deception you have practiced has been in the silence that you have maintained."

"It was a distressing subject to talk about. I often felt tempted to speak, and knew it was my duty. But my courage always failed when it came to the test. You had been so kind to me—I could not endure the thought of cold words and averted looks. But God has taken his own way of setting things right. I am sure you can bear with me a little longer."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Charlton inquired, struck by the hopelessness of the tone.

"Of course I must leave here at once. I must go out into the world to try my fortunes anew."

"Alas! my poor child."

"You see the necessity as clearly as I do," Neria went on, catching her breath in a sob.

"Even if you were willing to give me a refuge, knowing my history as you do now, I could not remain. Circumstances have rendered this impossible."

A slight flush kindled in the cheeks of the elder lady.

"Of course you refer to my brother's unhappy attachment for you," she said. "It is useless for us to disguise matters any longer. How unfortunate that you should have won his heart so entirely! I am not surprised, however. You are just the sort of person he could learn to love idolatrously, were every obstacle removed. Poor fellow! what has he not endured!"

Then, after a moment given to reflection, she added:

"You have decided wisely—you must go away. This house is no longer a proper refuge for you. Deeply as it will grieve me to part with you I cannot urge you to remain."

"Let me go at once—this very hour," cried Neria, starting up with burning cheeks.

"Calm yourself. There is no need of extreme haste. I intend finding you a good position with some kind person, to recompense you for the one you have lost. Nothing less would satisfy me. I will drive to the city the first thing to-morrow morning, and make inquiries among my friends."

Neria fell back again, her eyes flooded with tears.

"I will do anything you advise," she said, humbly.

"That is right, dear. I know you will find it hard to go among strangers again, but look to God for encouragement. He will give you strength for whatever trials are in store for you."

During the long hours of the night that followed, Neria lay wide awake, thinking of her wrongs, and the fresh trouble that had arisen. It seemed like a second banishment to leave this comfortable home that she had found so pleasant, and go out into the cold, unfeeling world again.

What should she do? The thought of Lawrence rose more than once in her troubled mind. She had heard no word of him during all these weeks. It was October when they parted, and now winter was almost over—the month of March had come round. Had he married her rival during the interval, and so raised an insuperable barrier between them?

"No matter," sighed the poor soul. "It is my marriage that Heaven will sanction as the true one. I entered into it in good faith. It will stand as long as the world endures. I care not though he did say it was illegal and void. Man has one way of judging of these things—God another. I have done nothing for which to reproach myself."

The temptation to seek her recreant lover and make one last appeal to his sense of right and honor rose strong within her breast. Such a step seemed useless, however. If he had married again—as was more than probable—all hope of having her wrongs adjusted was gone forever. Nothing remained but to take up the burden of life alone, meeting with a bold front whatever vicissitudes fate had in store for her.

"If I had loved him less idolatrously," he might not have been false to me," she thought.

Before morning dawned she had succeeded in calming her fevered pulses a little. When Mrs. Charlton came up-stairs to say good-by before setting out for the city, Neria had dressed herself, and was sitting up at the open window, pallid and cold, but very calm.

"Take courage," whispered the kind lady.

"You will always find a friend in me—I do not intend ever to lose sight of you. There are hosts of good people in the world. I hope to find you a home so pleasant you will soon cease to regret the one you leave behind."

The day wore on. Finding the solitude of her own room inexpressibly irksome, Neria finally went down-stairs for a book, hoping thus to beguile the long hours of their weariness until Mrs. Charlton's return.

As she opened the library door, some one rose up from a little table beside it. It was Mr. Brandon. Neria drew back with a startled cry—she had seen him drive away two hours before, and did not know he had returned.

"You here?" she stammered.

He came toward her. His face was haggard, with bluish circles under the eyes. One look sufficed to show that he had suffered intensely.

"I cannot bear to think that I am driving you away," he said, hurriedly, clasping her trembling hand. "Nothing grieves me so much as that. What can be done?"

"Nothing," she replied.

"I have thought the matter over again and again. I would do anything in the world to spare you a single pang."

"You and Mrs. Charlton have been very good to me," she said, with forced calmness. "I can never thank you sufficiently."

"Let me tell you of a plan that has suggested itself to my mind. I have long felt an inclination to go abroad. I might set out on my travels at once, leaving you here to cheer my sister's solitude while I am absent."

Neria understood at once the sacrifice he intended. With him away there was nothing to hinder her from remaining at Cragnest as long as she desired. He was ready to go in order that she might stay.

"No, no, no!" she vehemently exclaimed.

"It must not be. I will not be guilty of driving you away from your own fireside. It is your place, and I have no claim to be here, not the least. You are very generous and noble, and I thank you a thousand times. But it is I who must go. Do not waste upon me another anxious thought. I am reconciled to the change—or soon shall be."

Not trusting herself to say more, she broke from him abruptly and hurried back to her chamber. Her heart fluttered painfully, she knew not why.

"How sad it is that one so noble should be doomed to such a life," she thought. "To a good, true woman Gilbert Brandon would have made a most devoted husband. Now he is tied to that fiend in human shape. Ah, what terrible mistakes men, and women, too, often make!"

It was dark when Mrs. Charlton returned. She came up-stairs at once, looking both pleased and relieved.

"I have succeeded even beyond my expectations, dear," she said. "After some inquiries, an old friend referred me to a lady who is desirous of securing some agreeable young person for a companion. Of course I hastened to call upon her, and the result is that she has agreed to take you upon trial. You can go to-morrow."

Neria's heart beat a little quicker. Ah, if she had but known!

"What is the lady's name?" she inquired, after a brief pause.

"Mrs. Gerald Atherton."

It awakened no familiar chord in Neria's mind—she had never heard it before.

"Mrs. Atherton is somewhat of an invalid," Mrs. Charlton explained. "She has been married some months, but her health began to fail long before. It is my opinion that she has consumption. She has given up society on account of her health, and her husband is away on some mission or other in Europe. She leads a lonely life of it, with only servants in the house. She wishes some one who will prove a pleasant companion, and help enliven the hours of loneliness."

"Did she think I would suit her?"

"Very well indeed. You are just the sort of person she was wishing to secure."

Of course Neria did not dream of declining the situation. Mrs. Charlton had assured her that Mrs. Atherton would prove a very desirable person to be with, and there was nothing more required.

Early the next morning she set out on her short journey. Mrs. Charlton embraced and wept over her, exacting promises of frequent visits, but Mr. Brandon did not appear. Neria was spared the embarrassment of a formal parting with him.

The Atherton mansion was a large, handsome house in the suburbs of the city. The grounds about it were spacious, and evidently well kept during the proper season. Everything Neria observed indicated the abundant means and good taste of the owner.

A well-bred servant ushered her into the spacious hall. "What name shall I say?" he inquired, throwing open the door of a small but handsomely-furnished reception-room.

Neria hesitated. She could not quite reconcile it with her conscience to give a false name, and yet of course Mrs. Charlton had recommended her as "Miss Perdy."

"You may tell Mrs. Atherton it is the young person who has come to be her companion," she said, at length.

The servant bowed, and departed. Neria sunk into one of the luxurious chairs, a strange feeling of nervousness that almost amounted to fear coming over her. It seemed, oddly enough, as though a crisis in her life were at hand.

Presently the soft rustle of a woman's garments struck upon her ears. Neria was sitting with her head cast dejectedly down, but she raised it. A lady, tall, graceful and elegantly dressed, was coming toward her with outstretched hands. Neria gave a violent start, then sprang to her feet.

"Edna!" she gasped, her hoarse voice betraying surprise, dread and incredulity.

Mrs. Atherton took a step nearer. For one moment she stood transfixed, as though suddenly turned to stone. Finally a suppressed cry broke from her trembling lips.

"My sister! Is it possible that I have found you at last?"

And the two so long separated, but now strangely reunited, rushed into each other's arms.

CHAPTER XIII.

OF ONE RACE.

I survive,

To mock the expectation of the world.

—SHAKESPEARE.

SOME time elapsed before Neria or Mrs. Atherton could rally from the shock of this unexpected meeting. There were many kisses, tears and loving embraces before at last they became a little more composed.

Mrs. Atherton finally threw herself on a low stool at Neria's feet, her rich dress trailing the carpet unheeded. She was a very attractive-looking woman, with a fair, high-bred face, lovely blue eyes, and abundant blonde hair. Just now her usually pale cheeks were delicately flushed with the hectic of excitement.

She had taken both Neria's hands in her own, and while clinging to them, was looking up into the girl's face with a gaze full of tenderness and eager curiosity.

"How strange it seems that my hired companion should prove to be my own sister," she exclaimed. "I can scarcely realize the fact even yet. Tell me how it happens that you were reduced to the extremity of seeking such a position."

"What else could I do? I was friendless and penniless when I left my father's house."

"Oh, why did you ever go away?"

Neria dropped her eyes with a look of gentle reproach.

"Would you have wished me to remain, and wed the man papa had selected for my husband, knowing as I did that I should always dislike and despise him?"

"Perhaps you acted wisely; at least I hope it was for the best. But why did you never come back, or even write to us? We hunted everywhere for you—even advertised in the papers."

"It was my intention to cut entirely loose from the old life," Neria answered. "I felt that I no longer had any part in it. I had made my decision, and meant to abide by it."

"You were always a little headstrong, Neelie."

Neria started at the sound of the familiar pet name. It was one by which her sister had always addressed her. What an eternity had elapsed since she last heard it! She felt as though she had lived a century in the mean time. So she had, if duration is measured by what one suffers.

It was Mrs. Atherton who broke the brief silence that fell between them.

"What changes have occurred since you left us," she exclaimed. "I was living in Washington then, and had no idea what my future would be. Papa always urged me to marry a man of wealth and position, however, and so I have. You are not to infer that I wedded Gerald for his money, though. It is not true—I love him devotedly."

Neria did not even see the slow flame that kindled in her sister's eyes. All her thoughts just then were of another.

"Papa!" she gasped. "I have heard nothing of him in all these years. Nothing!"

Mrs. Atherton's face took on a sad expression.

"Prepare yourself for bad news," she said. "Poor papa is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. He died more than a year since. But his last words were of you, expressing a desire for your forgiveness. He felt that he had been severe and unjust in his dealings with you."

Neria's tears fell fast. Cruelly as he had treated her, she had always loved him.

"How sad," she murmured. "I was not even permitted to receive his dying blessing."

"There is more to tell," Mrs. Atherton resumed. "Do you remember having heard papa speak of a very eccentric old lady, Mrs. Faunce, who was mamma's aunt?"

"Yes."

"She is almost fabulously rich, and has no near heirs to her immense fortune. Well, who should appear unexpectedly at papa's funeral but this same Mrs. Faunce. She resides here, in New York, and brought me home with her at once. Before a month elapsed she had formally adopted me."

Neria's surprise and pleasure were very great. "You have been fortunate," she gently said.

"But I never forgot you, Neelie, even for a moment. After the change was effected I sought you more anxiously than ever, though secretly. Aunt Faunce became almost as much interested as myself in the search. We left no means untried to find you. But you had dropped the family name, it appears. Mrs. Charlton called you 'Miss Perdy,' I believe—"

"That was not the name I took at first," Neria interrupted. "Of course I did not wish it known that I was one of the Thorntons, of Washington; therefore I took the more plebeian name of Granger. It was the first that suggested itself."

"What a dreadful life you must have led! It seems very unfortunate that you, a Thornton, should have been driven to the expedient of working for your daily bread."

"I never felt that labor degraded me."

"Well, you were always peculiar in your notions," came the somewhat impatient response. "But it is all over and past—we will not quarrel about it now. I have found you, and we will never be separated again. Your days of toil are over. I shall take care of you—"

"Wait," said Neria, putting up her hand with an expression of pain. "Make no rash promises. You may feel differently when you have heard my story."

Mrs. Atherton looked surprised.

"I don't know why I should. We are sisters, and I would do anything in the world for you. But proceed with what you have to say. Even the most trifling items in your experience will be of interest to me."

Neria knelt down beside her sister, and with her face hidden on the latter's shoulder told all the story of her later years—how Lawrence Gordon had met, married and then discarded her, wrecking life and peace, and well nigh breaking her tortured heart.

The horror with which Mrs. Atherton listened to the tale can be better imagined than described. She was a very proud woman, and it was a terrible blow to learn that her sister had been so woefully deceived—a Thornton dragged down to the level of baser humanity.

For a moment she felt like throwing off the clinging arms wreathed about her neck. But a better impulse prevailed. Neria herself was blameless, she had not deserved the grievous misfortune that had fallen upon her, and Mrs. Atherton, with all her failings, was a just woman.

"The wretch! the cowardly villain!" she exclaimed, almost beside herself. "How dared he so trifle with a person of your birth and breeding? The name Thornton of itself should have been sufficient to shield you."

"Recollect, Lawrence never knew it was mine," Neria answered, between hysterical sobs. "Some whimsical feeling prevented me from telling him until it was too late. It was only as Neria Granger, the governess, that he knew me. I never disclosed to him the real facts of my history—he is not acquainted with them now."

"No matter. Wicked, heartless villain! He must have seen that you were a lady, despite the menial position you filled. I shall tell Gerald when he returns from abroad. My husband will seek him out and punish him as he so richly deserves."

"Oh, no, no," cried Neria, earnestly. "That would do me no good. I have no desire to see him suffer."

"Would you leave such a wretch to run his reckless race unmolested?"

"He no longer loves me. Nothing could restore my faith and trust in him. My wrecked life can never be made again what it was before he crossed my path. Any punishment that could be meted out to him would not avail me."

Mrs. Atherton rose, and walked up and down the room in great excitement. Her proud spirit chafed under the insult that had been thrown upon her through Neria's recreant husband.

"The facts connected with the marriage shall be thoroughly investigated!" she exclaimed. "Who knows but it was perfectly legal, despite that man's assertions to the contrary? He has shown himself base enough for any iniquity."

Her emotion subsided after a little, she was able to discuss the matter more quietly. Presently she took Neria up-stairs, and showed her the pretty suit of rooms that had been fitted up for her own use.

"My husband is very fond of me—he surrounds me with every luxury," she said. "How unfortunate that he should be away! He would know just what to advise. Ah, it would kill me if he were to abandon me as you have been abandoned."

"I believe it would."

"But he is incapable of such baseness. You do not know how kind and good he is! It was a great trial for him to leave me even for a few weeks."

"Why did he go?" Neria inquired, rather absently.

"Some business complications required his presence in Europe. I never attempted to understand them—it would have been of no use. But he was likely to lose a large sum of money—the bulk of his fortune. The matter was too important to be trusted to an agent, so he went himself."

Neria made no reply. She was mentally contrasting her sister's happy lot with her own. How dreadful it seemed that such contrasts must be.

"I will show you Gerald's picture," Mrs. Atherton said, after a pause. "It is the only one in my possession. He does not like the trouble of sitting. Here it is on the mantle. I keep it where I can run at any time and look at it."

She lifted it eagerly, and was coming forward to display it when the bit of painted ivory slipped through her fingers and fell upon the glowing coals in the grate. Instantly it was blackened and discolored past recognition.

A cry of dismay broke from Mrs. Atherton's lips. She sunk upon a chair bursting into hysterical tears.

"How careless of me! And I wanted so much that you should see it. Gerald is the handsomest man I ever saw. The accident almost seems like an evil omen."

CHAPTER XIV.

A SUDDEN ADOPTION.

My joys, like men in crowds, press out so fast,
They stop by their own numbers, and their haste.
—SIR ROBERT HOWARD.

THE morning hours slipped away unnoticed by the reunited sisters. They had so much to say to each other! There were a thousand questions to ask, and as many more to be answered. Every one knows how it is after a long separation of those sincerely attached to each other.

The abrupt ringing of the dinner-bell startled them both.

"So late!" Mrs. Atherton exclaimed, looking at her watch. "I had no idea how rapidly time was flying. We must make haste to dress. Where are your boxes?"

"Down-stairs," Neria replied. "I have but one, and brought it in the carriage with me. A hired companion does not require many dresses, you know."

Mrs. Atherton did not notice the half-sad smile that accompanied the words. She rung for a servant, and ordered the box to be brought up. The instant it was unlocked she drew out the poor, plain garments it contained, tossing them disdainfully aside, one by one.

"There is really nothing fit to put on. I don't know how you could ever make up your mind to wear such dreadful things, Neelie. They would better become a dairy-maid."

"They are the best I could afford."

"Well, you shall never wear them again. I will lend you some of mine, until you can get an outfit made."

Going to the wardrobe she took down a plain blue silk with trimmings of creamy lace. Neria remonstrated—she would sooner have worn the simple black serge she had on. Mrs. Atherton would not bear to it, however.

"My husband's mother is in the house—you will meet her at dinner," she said. "I do not wish she should see you dressed like a common servant."

Under these circumstances, Neria felt compelled to yield. Once arrayed as her sister desired, she scarcely knew her own reflection in the mirror, however, but blushed and drew back.

"Why, how beautiful you are!" Mrs. Atherton exclaimed, in accents of genuine pleasure and approval. "Fine dress makes all the difference in the world. I am quite plain beside you."

Going down-stairs they found the elder Mrs. Atherton already seated at the dinner-table. She was a handsome, well-preserved lady of fifty with a somewhat haughty cast of countenance. Neria was struck at once by something singularly familiar in her looks.

"This is my sister Neelie," Edna said, not deeming it necessary to make an elaborate explanation. "I think you have heard me speak of her, madam. She has returned quite unexpectedly, and will remain with me in future."

Mrs. Atherton merely bowed, but her countenance expressed interest and curiosity. She had heard something of Neria's flitting so long before, but not all the particulars.

"I know Edna is delighted to see you," she said at length, still scanning the girl's face attentively. "You have been a long while separated."

"Very long," Neria answered, just above her breath.

She was inwardly trembling. Something in the lady's voice set every nerve in her being aquiver. The feeling was so intense as to be even painful. Where, and under what circumstances had she heard it before?

Dinner ended, and the problem still remained unsolved, though it had perplexed her mind every moment of the time. She could not help recurring to it the instant she was alone again with her sister.

"Did we ever meet Mrs. Atherton years ago, when we lived in Washington?" she inquired.

"No," was the answer. "She was not in the habit of visiting there."

"Of whom, then, does she remind me?"

"I cannot tell, I am sure. She has a look like Gerald, only he is much the handsomer of the two. But you have never seen my husband; and it cannot be the likeness to him that impresses you."

"Of course not," Neria replied, in a dreamy tone. "I wish I knew who it could be."

The next morning an unexpected visitor made her appearance. It was no less a person than Mrs. Faunce, the great-aunt to whom Edna had once or twice referred. She was a withered little woman of seventy, with keen, penetrating black eyes, and a wrinkled though not unpleasant face.

Bursting unceremoniously into the chamber where the sisters were sitting, she stopped short with a muttered ejaculation of surprise, on seeing that Edna was not alone.

"Eh! Who is this? My old eyes are not so good as they were once. Seems to me I ought to know that face, but I don't. Edna, enlighten me."

The young wife came forward, flushing with pleasure.

"Look again, dear aunt Faunce," she said. "It is my long-lost sister. It is Neelie."

"Neelie!" ejaculated the old lady; starting back as though she had been shot.

"Yes. No wonder you are surprised. I could scarcely believe the evidence of my senses. It is like a romance. I was wishing to hire a companion, you know, and Neelie came for the situation. She had no idea that Mrs. Atherton was her own sister! How strangely affairs sometimes turn out."

Mrs. Faunce was staring at the girl with an odd twinkle in her bright, black eyes.

"Is it true?" she uttered. "Are you Neelie Thornton?"

"Yes, madam."

"I begin to believe it. But what possessed you to run away?"

"I would rather not talk about it, if you please," Neria answered, a pathetic little quiver in her voice. "If I did wrong, I have been sufficiently punished."

"I'm glad you got your deserts. But where have you kept yourself all these years?"

Neria turned her face aside without replying.

"My poor sister has a very sad story to tell," Edna interposed. "You must be very gentle with her, aunt Faunce."

"Gentle? Fiddlesticks! I shall treat her as she deserves—no better, no worse. So," again fixing her gaze on the trembling girl, "you did not find it so pleasant as you imagined fighting the world alone?"

"No, madam."

"Humph! Tell me all about it."

Mrs. Faunce threw herself into a chair, assuming a listening attitude. But Neria could not speak at once, she was so choked with emotion.

"Go on," said the old lady, impatiently. "I never like to be kept waiting."

"Let me tell her," said Edna, gently drawing her sister aside. "You are not equal to the task. I know the outlines of the story, and you can add the details some other time."

In a few touching words Edna related the romance of the poor wrecked life that had been blighted in its early springtime. Mrs. Faunce listened silently till the end. Her eyes flashed, and she drew a deep, hoarse breath more than once, before the recital was over.

"Bless me!" she cried, at last. "What an experience for a chit of a girl like you!"

Then, brushing one bony hand across her eyes, she added, in a more determined tone:

"Dreadful! I never heard anything like it. So that scamp married you, or pretended he did, then ran away and left you to shift for yourself? I could shake the villain! But we are not done with him yet. You have some one to back you now, poor child! We'll hunt him down! I'll put every lawyer in New York on his track. The wretch shall be punished, I promise you, for what he has made you suffer."

Neria's beautiful face grew white with anguish.

"I have no desire for vengeance," she said. "What comfort could it bring me? All I ask is the privilege of passing the remnant of my days in peace and retirement."

"The marriage must be acknowledged; you owe that to your friends," snapped Mrs. Faunce. "In spite of the scamp's assertions, I have no doubt but it is binding upon you both—"

"No, no," interrupted the girl, in a heart-broken voice. "Do not raise any false hopes in my heart. I have faced the bitter truth so long that I am learning to bear it. Another disappointment might kill me. The burden of shame and misery must be borne to the bitter end."

"The validity of the marriage shall be tested, at all events. Have you a certificate?"

"I had one. But he—Lawrence—took it away."

Mrs. Faunce trembled with indignation.

"I am not surprised," she cried. "The wretch was too cunning to leave any proof behind. What you say only confirms me in the opinion that the marriage is valid. What would he want of that bit of paper unless it could be used against him? No, you are the villain's lawful wife, and he knows it."

Neria put her hand to her head—everything seemed to be whirling around her. What if it should be true? What if the dreadful disgrace that had clouded her life should be swept away?

"Oh God, what a burden would be lifted from my aching heart!" she thought.

"Leave me to manage this business for you," Mrs. Faunce resumed, a red spot burning in either cheek. "I know how to deal with cowards and miscreants. Justice shall be done. All I require is a few names and dates, and a description of the place where the ceremony was performed. I shall consult with my confidential lawyer before I sleep. We will prove the marriage valid, then shake our fists in the young man's face. He may go his own way afterward, and we will go ours."

"Of course my sister could never be friends with him again, under any circumstances," Edna said, rather haughtily.

"I would disown her if she ever spoke a civil word to him," snapped the elder lady.

Poor Neria was suffering intensely. Very much against her wishes she gave the items of information Mrs. Faunce required.

Ah, how little did either of the three dream what a terrible trial awaited them in the near future!

For a long time afterward Mrs. Faunce sat without speaking. She was evidently revolving some problem in her mind. The girl's sad history and forlorn situation touched her

heart, and she was not one whose sympathies were ever enlisted in vain.

"Edna," she said, abruptly, turning to Mrs. Atherton, "I have something to propose. You are married to a rich husband who loves you devotedly. No wish of your heart need remain ungratified. Is it not so?"

"Yes," the young wife answered, opening her beautiful eyes wide with surprise.

"You are sufficiently rich in this world's goods without taking anything I may have to give?"

"Certainly."

"Well, poor Neria has nothing. She is literally a beggar. A sad strait for a Thornton to be in, but the truth may be told without disguise. Now I am coming to the point at issue. I have already acknowledged you as my heiress. How would it please you to step down and out of the position that your sister may occupy it in your stead?"

A moment's silence followed the question. Edna was not a selfish person, however, and she said heartily:

"I should like it above all things, aunt Faunce. My sister needs your money, and I do not. By all means make her your heiress. I hope you will."

Neria began to remonstrate, but the old lady refused to listen.

"The matter is settled," she said, in a tone of decision. "We understand our mutual positions without further words. I shall remember you handsomely in my will, Edna, but the bulk of my fortune will go to this homeless and friendless child. Hereafter she shall be as a daughter to me."

Mrs. Faunce laid her hand caressingly on Neria's bowed head, tears filling her stern old eyes.

"I trust we shall learn to love each other very dearly," she added. "I know I can love you if you will only let me."

CHAPTER XV.

THE LULL BEFORE THE TEMPEST.

Oh, how bitter a thing it is to look
Into happiness through another man's eyes!
—SHAKESPEARE.

NERIA could scarcely realize the fact of the change in her circumstances. It seemed like a dream. Could it be possible that she who had been a friendless outcast only a few hours before, had suddenly been given a home and a position in the world?

Nearly all her thoughts, however, centered upon the one question of the validity of the marriage ceremony that had been performed a year before in one of the little, out-of-the-way churches of New Orleans.

Mrs. Faunce's decisive words had restored hope to her despondent heart. Might it not be possible, after all, that Lawrence had deceived her, and she was his lawful wife in spite of his cruel denial?

"Heaven grant it," she thought. "What are wealth and influential friends worth to me without my own self-respect and peace of mind? I cannot hope for happiness until this cloud has been lifted from my heart."

Going down-stairs the next morning, after a sleepless night, she found Edna poring over an open letter. It had just come in by the morning's post. The young wife's cheeks were like roses, and her eyes shone with subdued happiness.

"Good news," she said, looking up with a smile as Neria entered. "I have a letter from my husband. The business that called him abroad is nearly completed. He is coming home!"

"Very soon?"

"He will be here in a week at the latest. I am almost wild with joy. Gerald is so brave, so noble, so handsome! It would be impossible not to love him. Sometimes I wonder why it is that God has blessed me with such supreme happiness while you—"

She stopped short; the contrast that Neria's saddened life presented was too vivid.

"Never mind," she added, hastily, kissing her sister's pale cheek. "Gerald will be a good, true friend to you. Take courage. He is so generous and so wise. He will know exactly the right course to pursue to redress your wrongs. I am very glad he is coming. I have implicit confidence in his judgment."

"Have you written to tell him I am here?"

"Not yet; and now it is too late. He has, perhaps, set out already on the return voyage. No matter. It will be a pleasant surprise for him when he arrives."

"Of course he knows that you have a sister?"

Edna's bright face saddened a little. "No," she replied. "He is a proud man, and has peculiar notions of propriety. I could never quite bring myself to tell him the story of your fitting. It was not until recently that Mrs. Atherton knew anything of it. She heard some sort of rumors abroad, and I had to tell her the truth."

Neria sighed. Why was it that she had always brought misery and disgrace upon her friends?

"Mr. Atherton may not be pleased," she faltered.

"It will be a little shock, just at first. But he is so generous and good he cannot be angry long."

"You seem to love him very dearly," said Neria, with another involuntary sigh.

"I do. He has written me such a beautiful letter—he always does, for that matter. I'm tempted to let you read it—just to see what good reason I have for lavishing such supreme affection on him."

She stretched out her jeweled hand with the letter, but before Neria could take it, drew it back with a vivid blush.

"I had better keep it to myself, after all. It is so much like a love-letter you might be tempted to laugh."

Neria felt her heart beat with a sudden thrill. Why did the handwriting, at the distance she saw it, present an appearance so painfully familiar?

Fortunately the elder Mrs. Atherton entered at this instant. The three repaired to the breakfast-room together, and the subject of the letter was not renewed.

Later in the day, Edna ordered the carriage. So much shopping must necessarily be done to equip Neria for her changed position, it was deemed best to begin at once.

They had gone the rounds of the leading shops, and purchased any amount of costly silks and laces—whatever Edna admired, for Neria scarcely felt or expressed a wish in the matter. What were fine raiment and costly apparel to her with her aching heart, and the dreadful interests she had at stake? But for the fear or displeasing her sister she would have discarded everything of the sort.

At last their faces were turned toward home. There was but one more call to make—at a fashionable dressmaker's where Edna had some orders to leave. While this was being done, Neria remained outside, sitting in the carriage. She was gazing listlessly down the street when some one crossed from the other side.

It was Gilbert Brandon. Neria's pulses throbbed deliriously as she watched him approach. Gladly would she have avoided a meeting, but there was no pretext for so doing. His pale, handsome face wore an expression of surprise as he noticed her changed appearance.

"I thought I recognized you," he said, quietly, "and could not go by without speaking. You are looking better and happier than when I saw you last."

She laid her hand in his outstretched palm.

"I have strange news to impart, Mr. Brandon, something that will surprise you very much."

"Does it concern your—your—"

"It concerns my friends, those from whom I have been so long separated," she hastily interrupted. "I have found my sister."

"That is good news indeed."

"God's providence must have been guiding all my ways," she resumed. "I ought to feel very grateful. The Mrs. Atherton I went to serve as a hired companion proved to be my sister Edna. It was a great surprise to me. I had no idea she was married, or living in New York."

Briefly she related what had occurred. Mr. Brandon listened with eager interest. He made no attempt to conceal his pleasure that Neria had found two such protectors as Mrs. Atherton and Mrs. Faunce.

"I have pondered deeply your sad story since you went away," he said, in a low voice, "and the desire to be of service to you has been very strong in my heart. But for this accidental meeting I should have sought you out. Your wrongs should be redressed. I might be able to do something—"

He paused, looking at her with wistful perplexity. The subject was a very delicate one, and so he felt it.

"You are very kind," Neria said, gently. "But there is no need to trouble you. My newly-found relatives will do all that is necessary."

"I am glad to hear it."

He held her hand a moment longer in his clasp, then sighingly released it.

"There can never be any more happiness for me in this world," he thought, "but the fair name of this poor wronged child must be cleared, her future assured. Ah, how willingly would I spend and be spent in her service."

Circumstances forbade this, however, now that other friends had been raised up to her.

He had scarcely gone when Edna came down the steps. Neria noticed with a sudden pang how tired and haggard her sister looked. A spot of hectic burned in either cheek, her eyes were feverishly bright, and she held one hand to her side, panting slightly, while resuming her seat in the carriage.

"Are you ill?" Neria inquired.

"Only a little tired," was the answer. "I am not so strong as I was once. The least thing upsets me."

"You should call in medical advice."

"There is no necessity. But for the pain in my side and chest, and the cough I have, I should be perfectly well."

Neria gave a frightened start.

"Do you have a cough? Why did you not speak of it before?"

"It only troubles me at night. Don't look so terror-stricken, dear. I have no ailment worth minding."

Edna laughed carelessly as she spoke. Neria could not get over the shock of her changed looks and of the revelation that had been made, however. She thought of nothing else during the homeward drive.

"My mother died of consumption," she said to herself. "How terrible it would be for Edna to go in the same way."

She mentally resolved to consult with Mrs. Faunce at once, and see what could be done to persuade her sister to call in a physician. She dared not even wait until Mr. Atherton should arrive. Edna's failing health had been noticeable from the first, but it had never struck her so forcibly before.

Nearly a week went by before Mrs. Faunce reappeared, however. The sisters were sitting alone, one morning, when she suddenly burst into the room in her characteristic way.

"I bring good news at last," she cried, running up to Neria, and kissing her on the forehead. "That is what I have been waiting for. A letter came last night from the agent my lawyer sent to New Orleans. He is thoroughly investigating the matter of the marriage. He found the chapel easily enough, and now he has stumbled upon the very man who performed the ceremony—"

She paused, for Neria had fallen back in the chair, pale and faint.

"Go on," gasped the wretched girl. "Tell me all."

"Then you must try to bear it a little better. It is a sad case, child, but that wretch will get the worst of it. His intentions were bad enough, the villain! but God was on your side, as He always is with the oppressed. The marriage—"

"Is it valid?" almost shrieked Neria, pressing her hands upon her heart.

"As much so as the laws of the land can make it," Mrs. Faunce answered, nodding her head triumphantly.

The poor girl sat as if stunned.

"Tell me how that could be," she faintly articulated at last.

"It appears that the scamp, Gordon, resorted to a ruse that other wretches like him have used in similar cases. He hired a reckless devil to personate the priest. The fool proved a trifle less vile than his employer, however. His heart misgave him before the hour appointed for the ceremony arrived, and—"

"What did he do?"

"Called in a *bona fide* priest at the last moment, and a legal marriage was performed!"

"Thank God!"

Neria's heart beat almost audibly for a few moments. She was a wife—there was no longer any reason to blush, or hide her head in shame. Ah, what blessed relief the knowledge brought her! Lawrence might refuse to own her—that did not matter so much. She scarcely thought of it. It was enough that she could once more look honest people in the face. The humiliation of her position was what was killing her.

"There is but little more to tell," Mrs. Faunce resumed. "Nothing can be more certain than that a valid marriage was solemnized. You are the lawful wife of that unworthy scamp. The fact must be published to the world, my dear, then we will procure a divorce as quickly as possible. But enough of that. What I set out to tell you was that Lawrence Gordon did not marry you under his true name."

Neria sat speechless, but her eyes were fastened on Mrs. Faunce's face, in a look that demanded everything.

"My agent did not discover his true name," the old lady continued; "but he is on the track, and hopes to do so in the course of a day or two."

Still Neria uttered no word in response. The power of speech seemed suddenly denied her. She wanted to be alone—to gain time, to realize what the revelation she had heard meant to her. Silently motioning her sister and Mrs. Faunce to leave the room, she buried her face in her hands, and sat thus for hours.

Her mind could scarcely grasp the change in her position. It seemed incredible that a glimmer of light had pierced this utter darkness. She felt wild, almost delirious with joy and relief.

At length the door opened, and Edna entered hastily. She brought in a telegraphic dispatch that had just been received.

"I, too, have heard blessed news," she cried, excitedly. "The steamer is already in the harbor. Gerald, my husband, will be with me in an hour."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STORM BURSTS.

With wild surprise,
As if to marble struck devoid of sense,
A stupid moment motionless she stood.
—THOMSON.

No sixty minutes had ever seemed so long to Edna Atherton as those following the receipt of the dispatch announcing the coming of her husband. She could not remain quiet anywhere for two consecutive minutes. Almost feverishly excited, she went flitting about the house, giving delicate touches here and there, brightening the rooms with flowers and vines, and arranging everything just as Gerald delighted to see things.

"It is the only way I have to express my love, or the happiness I feel at his return," she thought. "Dear, dear Gerald! I could not possibly do too much for him."

Presently she went up-stairs to dress. Twenty minutes more, and the hour would be over. Her husband would be there, holding her in his arms.

She attired herself in a cream-colored silk, placing white rosebuds and heliotrope blossoms in her hair. It was a costume that Gerald greatly admired and liked to see her wear.

"He shall find I have lost none of the beauty he used to praise," she said to herself, forgetting for the time every ache and pain. "My health and good looks must be preserved for his dear sake. Whatever the rest of the world may find me, I would always look beautiful to his eyes."

And inexpressibly lovely she did appear, a soft color glowing in her cheeks, and her eyes shining with the happy light of love and joyous anticipation.

When all was in readiness, she reentered Neria's chamber for a few last moments. "Don't think me selfish for manifesting my happiness so openly," she murmured, throwing her arms about Neria's neck. "My heart is singing for joy. I could not keep it to myself if I tried."

"Why should you?" Neria gently answered. "Do not let my troubles sadden this blissful hour. Forget them. I will rejoice with you if I can."

Edna breathed a half-repressed sigh.

"You will love Gerald, too, when you know him. I am glad for your sake, as well as mine, that he is coming home just now. You need just such a protector as he will be."

"Don't tell him my story at once," Neria said, with a sudden shudder. "The first hours of his coming home must not be saddened with it. To-morrow will do as well."

"Oh yes," Edna answered, in a soothing tone. "I will only say to him that my darling sister Neelie has returned. Of course he will be very much surprised, but I can put him off with a few words of explanation."

She started up and began to walk nervously backward and forward in the room.

"Of course I must have him all to myself for a little while. He has been away so long! It is only a few weeks to be sure, but it seems like as many years. I never knew how my life was bound up in him until he went away. Existence has seemed joyless enough since then. I have counted the minutes. We will have many things to say to each other just at first. You can wait here, Neelie, until I send for you. It may be some time—"

She broke off abruptly, and pressed her hand

upon her heart. At that moment there came the sound of carriage-wheels on the drive below.

"He is here!" she exclaimed, growing almost faint with joy and excitement.

A quick, impatient ring came at the bell. Neria arose from her chair, took a single step toward the window, but fell back again without looking out.

"What does it matter to me?" she thought, amazed at the strange fluttering of her heart. "I have no cause to feel impatient for Mr. Atherton's appearance."

Edna had already left the room. Neria heard her fleet step on the stairs, the bolts of the door shot back, then a suppressed cry of rapture. That was all, for she ran into her dressing-room, and shut herself in. The thought of her sister's happiness turned her sick, she scarcely knew why, unless it brought more vividly before her mind her own unhappy lot. She felt an irresistible desire to get as far away as possible.

More than an hour wore on. At last some one knocked for admittance. It was Edna's maid.

"My master and mistress are in the drawing-room," the girl said. "Mrs. Atherton has sent for you. She would like to introduce you to her husband."

Neria arose and began hastily to arrange her disordered dress.

"Tell my sister that I will come down at once," she said.

She felt more unnerved than ever now that the moment had come. At the drawing-room door, which stood slightly ajar, she paused a moment to recover herself. Edna was speaking, and every word reached her ears distinctly.

"I know you will not scold me, Gerald, for never having spoken of my sister Neelie before. She left home under peculiar circumstances; going out as a common governess. No Thornton had ever before done anything of the sort. I am both proud and sensitive, and could never bear to speak of the circumstances to you—"

"It is of no consequence," came the answer, as she hesitated for an instant. "I understand your feelings, darling, and shall think no less of you for any indiscretion of which your sister has been guilty."

At the first tone of that voice Neria started, her face grew ashy white, and she pressed her hands tightly upon her heart. Great God! What did it mean? Did her ears deceive her, or had she all at once gone mad?

Panting, bewildered, sick with terror, she made a desperate effort, and finally succeeded in dragging her benumbed limbs forward a few steps so that she could see into the drawing-room through the crevice in the half-shut door.

Gerald Atherton stood directly in the range of her vision, one arm lovingly encircling Edna's waist. Ah, how well the wretched looker-on remembered that handsome face! It was flushed with happiness now, but the eloquent eyes had gazed into her own a thousand times with the same expression of love and ardor they wore for another.

"My God! Lawrence Gordon!"

The stiffening lips could scarcely frame the words. They were uttered in so low a tone that the two within the room, wholly absorbed in each other, heard no sound.

Neria comprehended all at once. He who had won her love under a false name, and nearly broken her heart by his infamous treatment, was Gerald Atherton, the husband of her own sister!

The discovery almost killed her. Her face grew rigid, her eyes were strained, and for a few seconds her heart ceased to beat. The parting pang of death itself could not have hurt her more. It was dreadful!

She never knew how she succeeded in dragging herself back to her chamber. She felt bewildered, and more than half-suffocated. There was a ringing in her ears, and everything seemed to be whirling around her. "Be merciful, oh God, and let me die," was the only prayer of her tortured heart.

Edna, waiting below for her sister to appear, grew impatient at last and went in search of her. She was anxious that Gerald should meet her at once, feeling assured that Neria's pale, beautiful face would plead her cause and win his sympathy as nothing else could.

Just as her foot touched the stair, she heard the sound of something falling overhead. Full of anxious forebodings, she ran hastily to her sister's chamber.

The sight that met her startled gaze brought

a shriek of terror to her lips. Extended on the floor lay poor Neria, pallid and still, in a deathly

CHAPTER XVII.

A WOMAN'S DESPAIR.

Oh, give me thy hand,
One writ with me in sour misfortune's book!
—SHAKESPEARE.

EDNA raised no alarm. Some feeling for which she would have been unable to account, made her solicitous to conceal from everybody the fact of her sister's sudden illness. Locking the door, she succeeded, with some difficulty, in dragging Neria to the sofa, then hastily applied such restoratives as were at hand.

Some moments elapsed before the wretched girl opened her eyes. She sat up, and after looking about the room in a bewildered way, pressed her hands to her temples.

"It was no dream," she said.

Edna drew near, trembling and unnerved. "What is the matter? Why did you faint?" she inquired.

Neria pushed away her clinging hands with a shudder.

"I cannot tell you," she answered. "I cannot. Something dreadful has happened to me. Go away for a little while. Give me time to think it over. Do go. I wish to be left quite by myself."

Edna looked puzzled and troubled, but it would have been cruel to refuse compliance with that urgent request.

"Gerald is waiting for us in the room below," she ventured at length. "What shall I say—to him?"

The poor girl made no response. The mention of that name took away the last remnant of her strength. Pointing to the door, she turned her face to the wall.

"She looks half-crazed, like one who has received a sudden shock," Edna thought, as she went reluctantly away. "That cannot be possible, however. I wish she would let me remain to comfort her."

Left alone, Neria tried to think calmly of the discovery she had made. She felt numb and bewildered, like one suddenly awakened from a frightful dream. The reality seemed too horrible for belief. The man she had loved was under that very roof, the husband of her own sister! Surely fate had done its worst. No bitterer blow than this could ever reach her.

"Lost, lost to me, forever," she murmured. "Farewell, hope—farewell, happiness! This is the end."

Suddenly she struck her hand against her forehead. Was it the end? The facts connected with her unfortunate marriage had been investigated. The lawyer's agent had pronounced it valid. A man of his profession would not be led into error. By every right, legal and divine, Gerald Atherton was her husband, and not Edna's! All she had to do was to claim him as such.

The thought sent the blood coursing through her veins like fire for an instant. Then her better nature regained its ascendancy.

"No, no, no!" she moaned. "I can do nothing so cruel. Edna loves him even better than I did before the knowledge of his unworthiness came home to me. Her whole soul is bound up in him. She must not be made to suffer as I have done."

The minutes wore on. It was one of those terrible crises that come sometimes—not often—in the lives of mortals. No matter what step she took next—it would tell for time and eternity.

What was it her duty to do?

Over and over again she rehearsed all the circumstances of the case. If the lawyer's agent had told the truth, she was Gerald's lawful wife; he could neither deny nor discard her. She could take her place in the world as Mrs. Atherton, without a blot upon her name.

But—Edna!

It was the thought of her sister that unnerved her. Edna had married this man in perfect good faith, never dreaming that any question could arise as to the validity of the ceremony.

"She is not strong—it would prove her death-blow if the truth were to be suddenly revealed to her," Neria thought. "I cannot sacrifice my own sister—I cannot! She must never, never know."

But how was the dreadful secret to be kept? She could think of one way, and only one—to leave the house at once, before Gerald had seen her, and to avoid ever meeting him face to face.

Even then he would be almost certain to sus-

pect the truth when Edna had told him the sorrowful facts of her history. He could not help knowing that she was speaking of the very person he himself had basely deserted.

"No matter," Neria thought, "so long as he keeps the fact to himself—and he would be ashamed and afraid to disclose it. He evidently believes in the validity of the last marriage—not the first. I shall take care that he is never undeceived."

At that very moment Edna and Gerald Atherton were discussing her in the room below.

"I regret exceedingly that your sister is indisposed," the young man said. "It would be such a pleasure to meet her. Is she as beautiful as you, darling?"

"Oh, far more beautiful," Edna answered, with enthusiasm. "When we lived in Washington, she was acknowledged to be the handsomest lady there. Everybody admires her."

"I do not think she can surpass my lovely wife," he said, laughingly.

"Wait until you have seen her."

"What did you call her name?"

"Neelie," Edna answered, using the pet appellation quite unconsciously.

Not the least suspicion of the truth dawned upon Gerald's mind.

"There is quite a romance connected with her history, I think you said?"

"Yes, dear. But I am not ready to tell it to you yet."

Shortly afterward, she again made her way to the chamber above, hoping to find Neria quite recovered. A disappointment awaited her. The wretched girl was still reclining on the sofa, looking very languid and weak, though her face was flushed, and her eyes glittered with fever.

"I hope you are not going to be really ill," Edna said, as she bent above her.

Neria gave a gasp of dismay.

"Ill? Oh, no! I can't—I won't be ill. I would never do."

"Gerald and I have been speaking of you," Edna resumed, after a brief pause.

"Of me? Heavens! what have you told him?"

"Nothing, dear. It was no time to enter into explanations. But he is very desirous of seeing you, though it should only be for a moment. May I bring him up here, since you are unable to go down?"

Neria started to her feet, fairly panting with terror.

"No, no! It must not be. I will not hear to it."

"Of course you must have your own way," Edna said, wondering at the refusal, and her strange excitement. "But you and Gerald are certain to be good friends. You will find him an agreeable companion. I am very proud of my husband, and feel impatient to introduce him to you."

Neria drew a deep breath when her sister had left the room. "This must not go on much longer," she thought. "I am not able to endure it. I must go from here as quickly as possible."

Her hat and shawl hung in the little dressing-room near by. She attempted to cross the floor to procure them, but was compelled to sink into a chair from sheer exhaustion.

"Heaven help me," moaned the poor soul. "I am weaker than I thought."

Night soon fell. She welcomed it gladly. It would be so much easier to slip away in the darkness. All that she lacked was the strength to go. Ringing the bell, at length, she said to the maid who answered the summons:

"Bring me a glass of wine. I am ill, and have need of it."

"You do look bad, miss," said the girl. "Shall I tell my mistress?"

"Say nothing to any one. It is not necessary."

When the stimulant came, Neria drained it to the dregs. The wine gave her what she needed, a fictitious strength; but it would not last long. Hastily dressing herself in traveling attire, she stole forth without even tarrying to gather up a single trinket.

The gas was turned low in the hall—she stole down-stairs with a throbbing heart. The low murmur of a voice that she remembered only too well came from the drawing-room. Gerald and Edna were there. Neria scarcely breathed as she flitted past. The thought of discovery turned her faint and sick. She would have died rather than have had him encounter her then and there.

Before she could gain the outer door, footsteps approached from the drawing-room. He was coming! Neria had barely time to slip into a little curtained recess. Gerald came

slowly forward, pausing so near she might have stretched out her hand and touched him.

"Neelie! What an odd name," she heard him mutter, uneasily. "How strange that it should remind me of another! I must be getting nervous all at once. My poor, foolish Neelie! What has become of the child, I wonder? Months have elapsed since she disappeared so suddenly, and the agent I hired to hunt her up has not been able to find the least clew to her fate. She may be dead, ere this."

He shuddered and thrilled all over at the thought, though Neria did not see it. Bad as the villain was, he realized that, if his victim were really dead, he was a murderer.

He soon passed on. Neria heard him moving about in another part of the house. She was panting for breath, and her forehead was covered with heavy drops. Afraid to linger another instant, she made a sudden dash for the hall door, gained it, and almost before realizing the extent of the effort made, she felt the cold outer air strike across her face.

Her plans were already formed. Hurrying on breathlessly until she gained a street where carriages were passing and repassing, Neria hailed an empty cab, and drove at once to the residence of Mrs. Faunce.

It was a handsome house in a quiet side-street. The servant who let her in stared a little, but she pushed hastily past, afraid that her strength might suddenly give way.

"Take me to my aunt," she said. "Don't stop for any announcement. Let us go at once."

The startled girl led the way up-stairs, and pointed to a closed door. "My mistress is in there," she said. "You can enter."

Neria went swiftly into the room. A tiny fire smoldered in the grate, and Mrs. Faunce sat in an easy-chair beside it. A low ejaculation of surprise fell from her lips as she recognized the intruder.

"Why, Neria, child, is it you? What brings you here at this hour of the night?"

Then, catching sight of the girl's haggard face, she rose abruptly, and held out her arms.

"Something dreadful has happened to you, I fear. What is it?"

Neria threw herself upon that motherly bosom, bursting into a perfect paroxysm of weeping.

"Don't ask me," she panted. "I have no courage to tell you what I suffer. Take me in—give me shelter. I have no one now in all the wide world save you."

Mrs. Faunce drew the sobbing girl close to her heart. Though astonished beyond measure, she forbore to question further.

"You have come to the right place, dear," was all that she said.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SELF-SACRIFICE.

It is not, nor it cannot come to good;

But break my heart; for I must hold my tongue.

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE night dragged its slow length along, but even when the next morning broke, Neria had not roused herself sufficiently to offer any explanation. She lay passive and still, with her eyes closed, and seemed only half to breathe.

At ten o'clock a quick, impatient ring came at the bell. Neria started up with a shudder.

"It is Edna," she exclaimed. "Don't let her come here. I have no wish to see her again."

Mrs. Faunce looked curiously at the agitated girl. She could not even conjecture what had come between the sisters that Neria should shrink like this from a possible meeting.

"Calm yourself," she said. "You shall see no one that you wish to have kept away."

A servant entered with a message. "Some one to see you, madam," he said, addressing Mrs. Faunce. "He told me to say that he came in reference to that New Orleans business—"

Neria understood, and started up eagerly. New revelations had, perhaps, come to light. If her secret was to be kept, the time had come for action.

"Aunt Faunce, let me see this man," she implored. "I can conjecture why he is here. It is a matter that concerns me more than anybody else in the world. Suffer me to go down alone and hear what your agent has to say."

Mrs. Faunce stared. Was the girl taking leave of her senses?

"You are unequal to such an interview, my dear," she objected.

"I am stronger than you think. Do not cross me in this. There is more at stake than you imagine. Forgive me for keeping anything back. It is ungrateful when you have been so

kind, so helpful. But there is no other way. See what I suffer! It is almost a matter of life or death with me. You have not the heart to refuse. I am going, and alone! It must be so."

She had almost reached the door by this time. Mrs. Faunce hesitated, but only for an instant. She could not help being aware that the man had brought information that Neria wished to suppress.

"Be it as you will," she said, breathing a heavy sigh. "God knows I have only your best interests at heart."

Neria had regained her self-control when she reached the drawing-room door. A man came quickly forward as she entered.

"It was Mrs. Faunce for whom I asked," he said, an expression of surprise flitting over his face. "I have a little matter of business to discuss with her. The servant should have made the fact known."

"You can speak freely," Neria replied. "This affair concerns me more than anybody else. I am here with my great-aunt's knowledge and consent."

A sudden light seemed to break upon the man's mind.

"You are not the poor lady who has been so woefully deceived?" he stammered.

"I am Mrs. Lawrence Gordon." She drew her hand across her forehead, then went on rapidly, as though fearful her strength might give way:

"We will make this interview a brief one, if you please. I have only to exact a promise from you. Of course you are here because you succeeded in the mission to New Orleans, and have learned the true name and position of the man I married in that city?"

"Yes," he replied, looking at her with wondering eyes. "I know everything."

"So do I," Neria said, quite calmly. "Heaven has taken its own way to reveal the truth to me. It is not necessary for you to make any disclosures."

Then, dropping her hand upon his arm, she added, in a low, impressive tone:

"Now for the promise to which I referred. The secret you have discovered must remain forever locked within your own breast. I would rather die than have Mrs. Faunce or the world know that Lawrence Gordon and Gerald Atherton are one and the same! Swear to me—you must—that the fact shall never be divulged by your lips! Nothing less will satisfy me. Swear it!"

She leaned forward, still clasping his arm, and almost kneeling at his feet.

"Swear it," she repeated.

He hesitated. "Something is due my employer—"

"Mrs. Faunce is good and kind," Neria interrupted. "She will respect my wishes in this matter. It was solely for my sake that you were sent on this mission at all. No one has a right to deny me the privilege of suppressing the facts that have come to light, and they must be suppressed. I freely relinquish whatever claim the law may give me upon a wretch whose name nothing could ever induce me to bear."

The man appeared more astonished than ever. Unaware of the relationship existing between Neria and the second Mrs. Atherton, he could but marvel at the girl's determination to give up rights that meant so much to her.

"Of course I must yield," he said, reluctantly. "But—forgive me for saying so, madam—you are standing very much in your own light."

Neria rose with a gesture of utter weariness. She could not have held out much longer.

"I have weighed the matter well, and this is the only course I could bring myself to pursue."

She felt as though a great load had been lifted from her heart when he was gone. Edna, her beautiful, proud sister, must be saved at all hazards. She should never know the horrible truth—that it was her life upon which this crushing load of shame and sorrow had fallen.

"It does not matter what happens to me," she thought. "I will leave New York, and hide away from everybody. If Edna is only spared all knowledge of this disgrace I will ask nothing for myself."

She did not stop to inquire whether it would be right to leave her sister in ignorance of the truth. That question did not enter into her calculations. She only realized that it would kill Edna, in her present state of health, to know how terribly she had been deceived, and all minor considerations were submerged in the more important one of protecting the life and happiness of one so dear to her.

The opening of the door aroused her from the reverie into which she had fallen. Mrs. Faunce came forward, looking troubled and anxious, and drew up a chair beside her.

"I expect you to tell me everything, child," said the old woman. "I am your best friend—it is to me you must look for whatever help you receive. You shall not look in vain. But there must be no half-confidences between us."

She was surprised to see Neria draw back suddenly and cover her face.

"How can I tell you—how can I?" sobbed the wretched girl. "No, you must bear with me as patiently as you can. Something very unexpected has happened. I cannot explain—it is impossible; but, unless you wish to see me more unhappy than I am already, you must give me my own way in this matter. I no longer have the least desire to force my claims upon the man I married, or compel him to acknowledge me as his wife. Let us both try to forget that dreadful episode in my life."

"And allow that villain to go unpunished?" gasped Mrs. Faunce.

"Yes. I never wish to see him again," said Neria, with a shudder.

"What did my agent have to say to you?"

"He had succeeded in his mission. That is all I can tell you. Suffer me to keep my little secret, dear aunt Faunce. Were it not wisest and best, I should never dream of concealing anything. Only trust me."

Unable to withstand such pleading, Mrs. Faunce could only sit and glare half-fiercely at the young girl.

"This is incomprehensible," she exclaimed.

"At the very moment when the way is paved to have ample justice done, you turn about and forbid me to take another step! Well, I must submit until you come to your senses again, I suppose. I do it very reluctantly, however."

An hour or two later, a close carriage rolled up to the door. Neria hastened to the window and looked out. She saw her sister alight, leaning lovingly upon Gerald's arm. Oh, how her heart ached at the sight! It was her rightful place—one that she might claim at any moment she felt so disposed.

She had barely time to lock the door before Edna's clear, sweet voice became audible in the hall.

"Where is Neria? Is she here? It gave me a dreadful start when I discovered that she had gone away in the night. My poor sister! She must be ill and delirious, or she would not have done anything so strange and incomprehensible."

The low murmur of Mrs. Faunce's voice came in response.

"Yes, Neria is not herself. Trouble has unsettled her reason, I fear. She came to me for shelter and comfort. Poor thing, she is resting now, and must not be disturbed."

"Oh, let me see her, if only for a moment," pleaded Mrs. Atherton. "I wish to ask her why she went away."

But Mrs. Faunce remained firm.

"Another time, my dear. Neria is under my care just at present, and shall not be annoyed."

The unhappy girl heard no more. Throwing herself into a chair, as far away from the door as possible, she buried her face upon her arms. That sorely-tried heart had well-nigh given way.

CHAPTER XIX.

AWAKING FROM A DREAM.

You have bereft me of all words,
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins.

—SHAKESPEARE.

It was not without a vague foreboding of some terrible calamity that Edna Atherton left Mrs. Faunce's house after the unsuccessful attempt to gain an interview with her sister.

There was something mysterious and suspicious about the whole affair. Neria's sudden illness, strange looks, and abrupt flitting in the night-time, must have had an adequate cause. But what?

Edna could not even conjecture. On leaving the house she sank wearily upon the velvet cushions of the carriage, for the first time almost oblivious of the presence of her husband, and scarcely replying to his tender sallies.

The instant they reached home, and found themselves alone in the pleasant back parlor where they preferred to sit, she made up her mind to tell Gerald everything. It was he himself, who, wholly unconscious of what was coming, prepared the way for the disclosure.

"Do you have a secret you are, darling?" he said. "Forgive me for asking, but you are troubling yourself too much over your sister's whimsical conduct in leaving the house so ab-

ruptly. "I'm afraid she does not deserve the solicitude you waste upon her."

Edna leaned her head against his shoulder, and the tears she had vainly tried to suppress, burst forth.

"Don't say that," she cried. "You do not know my darling Neelie."

"She does not appear very anxious to make my acquaintance, or she would not avoid me so persistently," he dryly answered.

"My poor sister has suffered much, Gerald. Few young girls could pass through what she has done, and live. Do not judge her harshly. Her whole nature has been changed. I can only think of her in pity and love—overlooking every inconsistency in her conduct."

Gerald shrugged his shoulders. This troublesome young woman who had so unexpectedly come to light, was not a person in whom he felt any considerable degree of interest. He would have preferred that she had remained away altogether.

"She must be a little crazed," he said, rather brusquely.

"It would be no marvel if she were. Never was an innocent girl more foully wronged."

Gerald felt the blood come into his cheeks. Wronged! He was a proud man, and did not like that word spoken in connection with his wife's sister.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Let me tell you Neria's story," Edna said, gently. "Then you will understand everything. I would have told you before, but my sister forbade it—"

He was not listening. The name she had spoken fell on his ears like a clap of thunder from a clear sky. He felt stunned, bewildered.

"Neria!" he interrupted, in a strange, choked voice.

"That is my sister's real name. But she was always called Neelie at home; I call her so still."

He put out his trembling hand. A faint suspicion of the truth had dawned upon his mind, filling it with horror unutterable.

"Tell me the story," he panted. "At once."

Edna did not observe the convulsive shudder that ran through her husband's frame, but began in a low voice to give the outlines of Neria's pathetic history.

Before it was half-finished, Gerald had pushed her from him almost roughly, risen to his feet, and was pacing the floor with hurried, uneven strides.

"I am not surprised to see you so moved," Edna paused to say, happily unconscious of the real cause of his emotion. "I felt very indignant myself. It is hard to believe that such cowardly villains as this Lawrence Gordon really exist. How one hates and abhors such treachery!"

"Finish the recital," Gerald exclaimed, turning round and glaring fiercely at his wife. "I am anxious to be done with it."

His mind wandered in a wild chaos. The shock came so suddenly and unexpectedly he had almost betrayed himself. It seemed incredible that the beautiful young girl he had loved, won and treacherously deserted could be the sister of his own wife! Surely fate had done its worst.

"Cursed luck!" he said to himself, gnashing his teeth. "How am I ever to extricate myself from such a complication?"

It was clear, however, that Edna did not suspect. He could not feel so sure of Neria, however. Her strange conduct, and sudden departure from the house so soon after his return, seemed to indicate that she knew all.

A temptation to fly—to leave the country—crossed his mind, but he instantly banished it.

"No," he muttered, doggedly, "I'll stand my ground, and face the worst, whatever it may be. Neria is powerless—what can she do?"

Edna's very next words dispelled this latter delusion, however.

"Aunt Faunce has taken a deep interest in my sister," she said, "and will do everything in her power to right her wrongs. She has already decided to adopt Neria, and leave the bulk of her large fortune to her, rather than to me, who do not need it."

Gerald felt like breaking into a volley of curses. How surely his sins were finding him out! It was the wealth Edna expected to inherit that had induced him to make her his wife. He needed it to prop his own falling fortunes.

"The most singular part of the story remains to be told," Edna resumed, in blissful unconsciousness of the full significance of her words. "You know what a resolute woman aunt Faunce is. Well, she made up her mind at once

that justice should be done my poor sister, and sent an agent to New Orleans, where the marriage was solemnized, that the affair might be fully investigated."

Gerald clung to the back of a chair, feeling himself turn sick with dread and apprehension.

"With what result?" he stammered.

"Every effort is being made to learn the true name of the wretch, for of course that of Lawrence Gordon was assumed to hide his real identity. But that is not what I set out to tell you. It is of the marriage I wish to speak."

"What of that?" he demanded, with sudden apprehension.

"It appears that the wretch who intended to deceive my sister with a false marriage was himself deceived. The tool he hired for his nefarious purpose happened to be gifted with a conscience. A real clergyman, instead of the impostor who was expected, performed the ceremony."

Gerald staggered back a step, his forehead covered with heavy drops. What a fearful retribution had overtaken him! He looked so strange that Edna was at once struck by his expression.

"You are ill!" she exclaimed. "Why did you not tell me so before?"

She was hastening to his side, full of loving solicitude, but he waved her away. A sense of his own unworthiness lay heavily upon his mind. He could not endure that she should touch him.

"I don't feel very well," he stammered. "I had better go up stairs for awhile. We can resume this subject some other time."

He went out hastily, locking himself into the dressing-room above. Ah, how bitterly, at that moment, he repented of his infamous conduct! Too late. It was done, and could never be recalled. Now he had only to meet the consequences.

But what would they be?

It was no easy matter to realize his changed position. A feeling akin to despair took possession of his soul. He had lost everything. Who could have foreseen such a terrible complication? Not only had Mrs. Faunce's thousands slipped through his fingers, but, if the New Orleans marriage was valid, Edna was not his wife, but the woman he had so basely deserted.

"I am ruined," groaned the unhappy wretch. "If these facts come to light, I can never raise my head among honest people again."

He sat down, trying hard to see a way out of the difficulty. But no light broke upon his troubled and bewildered mind. Whichever way he turned, his path was beset with difficulties.

"I am in Neria's power," he thought. "She can crush me with a word. But will she do it?"

The fact that she had thus far remained silent afforded but scant encouragement. Who could tell but she was nursing her wrath, and collecting her forces, to make the blow all the more terrible when it fell?

"I'll go to her," he finally resolved. "It will be an ordeal to meet her face to face again, but I shall know what to expect, and that will be better than to endure this racking suspense."

In spite of the mental anguish he suffered, Gerald dressed himself very carefully before going out. By this time night had fallen. His heart thrilled, almost failing him, as he strode past the door leading into Edna's chamber. What a wreck he had made of that innocent young life!

"She is not strong—it will kill her to learn the truth," he thought. "Poor Edna! What a pity that the blow must fall most heavily upon the innocent! Heaven knows I would shield her if possible."

It was nine o'clock when he reached Mrs. Faunce's residence. A strange girl answered his summons at the bell. He had laid no plans how to gain access to Neria's presence, but intended to be guided by circumstances. He did not even know by what name Neria was known in that household.

"I wish to see the young lady who is stopping here," he said, advancing a step on the threshold.

"Do you mean Miss Thornton?" inquired the girl, looking at him askance.

"Yes, Miss Neria Thornton."

"She is ill, and does not receive visitors, sir."

"But I must see her. It is very necessary that I should. Why do you stand in my way? Show me to her room at once."

The girl drew back a step.

"It would be all my place is worth," she stammered. "We have positive orders. Miss Thornton is to be denied to everybody."

Gerald studied the girl's face attentively a

moment, and saw that she would be susceptible to a bribe.

"Take this," said he, dropping a gold piece in her reluctantly extended hand. "You have only to indicate the door. That is all I will ask. No one can blame you for performing so trifling a service."

She glanced at the gold piece with glittering eyes. "Take the third door to the left," she said, in a whisper, and ran away trembling.

Gerald followed the instructions given. Arrived at the door in question, he paused a moment to listen. No sound came from within, and at length he ventured to raise the latch.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TWO WIVES.

The past, would you give up the past,
Such as it is, pleasure and crime together?

—ROBERT BROWNING.

NERIA was alone in the room, sitting beside the dying fire. She looked pale and worn, and traces of tears were on her cheeks. She had been reflecting upon the events of the past year, and her heart beat heavy with grief and apprehension.

The opening of the door caused her to turn her head. She saw her recreant husband cross the threshold, and advance into the room. She pressed her hand to her side, and everything seemed to whirl for an instant.

"You!" she stammered. "You!"

He went straight toward her with outstretched hands, his features fairly convulsed with emotion. The sight of that stricken creature had melted his heart, and changed his purpose in an instant. All the old tenderness that he thought dead, had started into sudden life again.

"My poor child," he exclaimed, "what has changed you so? Am I to blame for this?"

She started to her feet and drew back a step, looking at him almost wildly.

"Do not come any nearer," she panted. "Why did you seek me here, to add another pang to my wretched life? Had I not suffered enough already?"

"Forgive me! I have been a wretch, Neria. I freely acknowledge it. Do not look upon me with such horror in your lovely eyes. I am anxious to make amends. Only give me the opportunity."

A shade of disdain crossed her face.

"Amends?" she repeated. "It is too late to talk of that. You have broken my life, poisoned my youth, destroyed my once radiant hopes."

He advanced still another step, touched by her beauty and sorrow as he had never been before.

"I wish to atone. I will do anything that is reasonable," he said, eagerly. "I came heretomight thinking to bargain with you to keep our miserable secret. Now that I have seen you my whole purpose seems to be changed. Dictate whatever terms you please—I am ready to assent to them."

"All I ask of you is to go away, where I may never see your face again."

"Do you no longer love me, Neria?"

"Love you?" she repeated, her eyes glittering with indignation. "How dare you ask a question like that? Love you after being deceived, betrayed and heartlessly cast off? But we will not speak of that. Reproaches cannot avail. You are now the husband of another. I have given you up; Heaven will help me to endure my darkened lot. Be merciful now, and leave me to my fate."

If she had fancied that he might still be ignorant of the validity of their marriage, his next words undeceived her.

"Why should we be separated?" he said, looking at her intently. "You are my lawful wife. What is to hinder me from claiming you as such?"

"The vows you have breathed to another."

"Vows that have no binding force. Edna has no legal claim upon me. That is impossible, since you were already my wife when I married her."

Neria panted slightly, and a feeling of faintness came over her. He knew all, and now, as he looked at her, she saw all the old love and adoration burning in his eyes.

"I have been told that the marriage ceremony in which you and I took part, is legal and binding," he resumed. "I did not intend it to be such at the time, but fate ruled otherwise, and we must submit. In spite of the terrible predicament in which it places us, I cannot say that I am sorry. Are you, darling?"

He leaned toward her with so much passion

in his face that Neria was terrified. A gulf seemed to yawn suddenly at her feet. Here was a peril that had never once entered into her calculations. She had not dreamed that Gerald still felt any lingering tenderness for her, or would wish to claim her as his wife.

"Hush," she panted, hoarsely. "Do not compel me to despise you more than I do already."

He stared at her in blank amazement.

"Do you refuse to acknowledge my claims?"

"I do."

But he was unabashed: "Take a moment to consider. I find that you are dearer to my heart than I ever imagined. This meeting is like a revelation. I am ready to give up everything. Everything, Neria! Say the word, and we will leave the country to-morrow morning, never to return."

She did not answer, nor move.

"Think of the position in which you will be placed by rejecting my offer," he resumed.

"The story of your youthful folly will certainly leak out. Such things cannot be long concealed. It would be impossible for you and I to meet each other daily as common friends. Human endurance has its limits. I shudder to think of the future that awaits us all unless you consent. It is the easiest—the only way out of the terrible complication in which we have become involved. Say that you will go."

His voice was full of tenderness. He was like a lover pleading for the one priceless boon his heart held most dear.

Neria put up her hand, still waving him away.

"Have you no shame?" she breathed. "Think of my poor sister. Where is your consideration for the innocent girl you promised to love and cherish?"

A scarlet flush swept over his face. He had almost forgotten the poor wronged wife who was at that very moment anxiously awaiting his coming in her pretty boudoir.

"Edna shall never be tortured as I have been!" Neria exclaimed, with sudden energy.

"She loves you, unworthy as you are. For her sake I have spared you thus far, and planned and plotted to keep the secret of your identity. She would never survive the knowledge of the truth. Go back to her, go at once! Be to her the true, loving, devoted husband she thinks you, and I will try to forgive the bitter wrong you have done me. My innocent sister must be spared at any sacrifice."

"And you?"

"It matters little what becomes of me," she cried, miserably. "My lot is heavy, but God will give me strength to bear it."

"I fear you are stifling the voice of your own heart," he said, fixing his eyes on her with a strange, intense longing.

"I am trying to do my duty; that must suffice."

"Neria—"

She interrupted him with a gesture of impatience.

"Spare me. Let this scene come to an end. It is inexpressibly painful. You and I must go separate ways. We have but one common cause—to protect my poor sister, shielding her from even the faintest breath of calumny. I think it can be done. With us both working for the same end, the suppression of the truth, we can but succeed. Heaven, I am sure, will bless our efforts. If we do wrong, it is that good may come of it."

She was quite calm now, the calmness that intense suffering sometimes gives. Gliding to the door, she held it open for him to pass out.

"Farewell," she said. "Heaven grant that you and I may never meet again."

Gerald was deeply moved. Her abnegation of self touched all that was best and noblest in his nature. Almost involuntarily he moved toward the door, but paused on the threshold.

"I think you loved me once," he said.

"Did I?" she uttered, passing her hand over her brow. "It may be. I scarcely know my own heart. It does not matter. All my hopes and dreams have come to utter bankruptcy."

"We were very happy together during those first months of our wedded life. Have you no desire to live that blissful time over again?"

"None," she answered, in a hollow voice. "It could never be. When one once wakes from a blissful dream it cannot be recalled."

She made an eager gesture for him to leave her, and sunk panting into the nearest chair. He hesitated a moment longer, looking at her with love, anguish, dread and self-reproach all plainly written in his face, and then slowly left the room and the house.

It was midnight before he could make up his mind to enter his own door. Late as was the hour, Edna still sat up waiting for him. He attempted to steal cautiously past the boudoir, but those loving ears caught and recognized his step.

"How late you are!" she exclaimed, throwing open the door and stealing into his arms with a gentle kiss. "Come in here. You must be cold and tired. I had a warm cup of coffee brought up for you not ten minutes ago."

He could do no less than follow her into the coquettish little room. It was full of light and warmth, and pretty things. Edna had drawn up an easy-chair—his slippers and dressing-gown lay close beside it. Gerald felt a choking sensation in his throat as he gazed around. It was pleasant to be the recipient of these little attentions; and yet how she would shrink from him if she knew the truth!

"I am sorry you sat up," he forced himself to say. "Don't do it again."

"It would have been impossible to sleep. The evening has seemed long and lonesome with you away."

She wheeled a small table up to the fire, and placed a tray on it within reach of his hand. Gerald sat for awhile with his eyes fixed steadily upon her face. It wore a drawn, pinched look quite new to him, and a hectic spot burned in either cheek.

"You have worn yourself out with watching," he said, feeling a keen pang of self-reproach. "Why did you do it?"

"Oh, I am not tired in the least."

She sat down in the nearest chair, her face lighting up with the happy smiles his presence always called forth. How pretty, innocent, and child-like she looked, with the soft firelight playing over her graceful figure! Gerald asked himself wondering how it had been possible for him to win the love of two such women as Edna and Neria.

She did not utter a single reproach because he had left her, or inquire what had taken him away. It seemed to suffice that he was back again, and she could bask in the delight of his presence.

Suddenly clasping the slender hand that lay in her lap, he said, in a voice that trembled visibly:

"How would you bear it, Edna, if compelled to give me up altogether?"

She lifted a startled glance to his face.

"Don't speak of such a contingency," she said, with a shudder. "We have been separated enough. You must never, never leave me again."

The repressed excitement with which she spoke sent her into a violent fit of coughing. Gerald had heard nothing like it before. Suddenly she pressed her handkerchief to her mouth, and a few drops of crimson fell on her white dress.

"What is that?" Gerald cried in sudden terror.

"Blood!"

Their eyes met for an instant. Hers were full of pleading anguish. The wretched man fell back, shocked and stunned. He seemed to realize at once what was to be the end.

CHAPTER XXI.

FEDORA'S FATE.

"It is over. What is over?"

Nay, how much is over truly?"

A SURPRISE awaited Neria. She was sitting listlessly at the window, the morning subsequent to Gerald's visit, when a sudden commotion in the street caused her to look out. A crowd had gathered about a woman on the sidewalk, and two strange men were trying to lift her into a carriage, despite the frantic struggles made by the poor creature to escape.

Neria recognized her at a glance. It was Fedora Brandon! For an instant she sat spell-bound with surprise. What strange Providence had brought that poor, crazed woman to her door? It was wonderful, to say the least.

Of course she could do no less than hasten to Fedora's rescue. Descending to the street, she laid her hand on the arm of the man who stood nearest.

"What are you doing with that poor soul?" she demanded.

"Taking her to the asylum," he replied. "Don't you see she is mad—mad as a March hare? It isn't safe for her to be walking the streets."

"Has she no friends in this crowd?"

"Not one, miss. Nobody knows who she is, or where she came from. When I first noticed her, she was staggering along, wringing her

hands, talking to herself, and gesticulating. She looks about fagged out, poor thing."

She did indeed. Her face was a ghastly pale, she breathed heavily and painfully, and there were strange bluish shadows about the sunken eyes.

"This lady is a friend of mine," Neria said, hastily. "She seems to be very ill. I could not think of her being sent to an asylum. She needs the tenderest care. You can bring her in here. I will see that those having charge of her are notified at once."

"Very well, miss."

Five minutes later, Fedora was lying on the couch in Neria's chamber, and the crowd had dispersed.

The poor soul did not seem more than half-conscious at first; but presently she unclosed her eyes and fixed them in a piercing look on Neria's face.

"Ah," she cried, feebly, "is it you? I have never forgotten that face, and never will. Gilbert thought it far lovelier than mine. No wonder. I have never been to him the wife he deserved. I could not be. Whenever I tried there was something here in my head that set me all wrong, and hindered me from succeeding. He is tired of me, I suppose, and wants a companion who will be more congenial."

"Hush," said Neria. "Tell me why you were wandering up and down the streets alone."

"It was my head again. It has done nothing but whirl and buzz for days together. I thought it would be better if I got away, and went where I pleased."

"Poor woman. Lie down and keep yourself quiet for a little. I am going to send a messenger for your husband."

"Do," was the answer. "I am too weak to go back, and I miss him sadly. I should feel better if he were here."

Neria went out and dispatched a servant for Mr. Brandon, and another for the nearest physician. By this time Mrs. Faunce had come down from her chamber. She had already heard that a strange woman was in the house, and seemed half-inclined to be angry.

"What is all this?" she exclaimed.

Neria hastily explained. "I could not send Mrs. Brandon away. She does not look strong enough to bear even the shortest journey. I am surprised that she did not sink down exhausted in the street."

Mrs. Faunce was a woman of generous impulses, and her brow cleared at once.

"Well, we will do what we can for the poor soul. But I don't believe in taking in common vagrants from the street."

The physician was first to arrive. After a brief examination he stepped aside and gravely said:

"The patient is very low. She cannot last through the day. You had better send for her friends, if she has any."

Neria's heart beat with sudden fear. What if Fedora should pass away before Mr. Brandon could arrive?

A little past noon he drove up to the door, accompanied by Mrs. Charlton. His horses were covered with foam and dust. Hurrying up the steps, he scarcely paused to greet Neria, who met him at the door, but entered the chamber where his wife was lying.

"How is she?" he hoarsely inquired.

"Be prepared for the worst," said the physician, who stood near.

"Is she dying?"

"She is sinking fast. It is well you are here. In an hour's time all will be over."

Neria saw him totter toward the bed, and fall on his knees beside it. Then she went out, followed by the physician, and closed the door, leaving husband and wife together.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Charlton waited in one of the ante-rooms near by, her hand closely clasped in that of her young friend. A tear fell down her face now and then, but on the whole she looked relieved.

"It is better so," she finally said: "better for my brother, better for Fedora herself. I cannot tell what a charge she has been to us. Gilbert has suffered everything, endured everything."

"It will soon be over."

"She has been more than usually violent for some days. I felt that the end was near. Early in the evening the hired nurse fell asleep at her post, and it was then that Fedora escaped. We did not know she was gone until long after daybreak. I can never forgive the woman for her carelessness. Gilbert had watched with her himself for many nights, until he was quite worn out, and I prevailed on him to take a little rest. He was almost

distracted when he learned what had occurred."

Mrs. Charlton sat for a moment with her eyes fixed upon the carpet, and then resumed:

"We have succeeded well in keeping Fedora hidden from the world. You are the only person outside the house who was aware of her existence. But all will come out now; secrecy is no longer possible. No matter. She will soon be beyond the reach of human justice, and I know that Heaven will deal leniently with one like her."

"You once told me that Mrs. Brandon had been guilty of a great crime," Neria said.

Mrs. Charlton shuddered.

"Yes. I cannot bear to speak of it. The story is a horrible one. The briefest outline must suffice. It was after her baby was born that the first symptoms of insanity manifested themselves. I think she was jealous of the love Gilbert lavished upon the child. We were spending the summer on the sea-shore. One day Fedora took her babe down to the beach, and carrying it far out on the rocks, deliberately left it there until the tide came in and swept it away."

"How horrible!"

"A party of fishermen were near enough to see what she had done, but the child was dead before they could reach it. Of course there was a great excitement. My brother hurried Fedora away before an arrest could be made, and fortunately for them the train on which they fled was wrecked. You can divine the rest. Fedora's name appeared in the list of the killed. The stratagem was hardly justifiable, perhaps, but Gilbert could do no less. He pitied his mad wife, and wished to spare her all that was possible."

"She has been living at Cragnest all these years?"

"Yes. No other refuge seemed to promise so well. The house is retired, and we could be constantly with her to see that she did no further harm. But it has been a terrible life for us all. Wicked as it may appear, I can but rejoice that the end approaches."

Even as she spoke a low wail sounded from the inner room. She raised her head, and her eyes met Neria's for an instant.

"All is over," she said, in a solemn voice.

It was even so.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BRIDGE OF GLASS.

Ah me, how weak a thing
The heart of woman is!—SHAKESPEARE.

MISFORTUNES never come singly. The morning subsequent to Mrs. Brandon's sudden death Neria was sitting alone in her chamber when the maid brought in a letter. It had been left at the door by a messenger, and was addressed in Gerald's Atherton's well-known hand.

Neria felt a faintness come over her as she recognized the familiar writing. "What can he have to say to me?" she murmured, pressing her hand upon her beating heart.

The first impulse was to return the letter unread; but curiosity and interest triumphed. Breaking the seal, she read these words:

"Edna is quite ill, and asks for you continually. Your conduct in leaving the house so abruptly, and persistently remaining aloof, perplexes and distresses her. She thinks of nothing else. Her mind is filled with vague conjectures. She fears that something has been done to offend you. I entreat you to come to her, if only for an hour. It will be an ordeal, but you can bear it. This letter is written at her request, though, of course, she is ignorant of its wording. The poor child grieves about you to such an extent she may fall seriously ill, if you refuse to come. Worse than all the rest, she might suspect the truth! Come, if only to avert such a calamity."

Neria read this letter twice through, her face growing white even to the lips. Edna ill, and calling for her! How dreadful! Surely she might have been spared such a trial as this?

"Of course I must go to her," she thought. "It would seem heartless and cruel to remain away. But it is hard—very hard!"

She dressed herself for the journey and ordered the carriage at once. Her limbs trembled, and she panted with emotion as she ascended the steps of the Atherton mansion, and rung the bell. Little did she dream, at the time of her hurried flight, how soon she would be back again.

The elder Mrs. Atherton let her in.

"I am glad you have come," she said, an expression of relief flitting over her face. "Edna does nothing but fret, and ask if you are here.

At this rate she will soon work herself into a fever."

"What made her ill?" Neria eagerly inquired.

"She was up late, the night before last, waiting for Gerald to come home, and took a violent cold. It has settled on her lungs, and we have not been able to break it up."

Neria drew a quick, shivering breath. "Can I go to her at once?"

"Certainly. You know the way."

"She is alone?"

"Yes."

Neria hurried away. The woman's eyes were fastened on her face in an expression that made her uneasy. Could it be possible that Mrs. Atherton suspected the truth?

Breathing a silent prayer for strength, she entered Edna's chamber. The sick girl was reclining in an easy-chair beside the fire. She wore a loose white dress, with a shawl drawn over her shoulders. Neria was shocked and startled by the change a few hours had wrought. Edna looked haggard, pallid, and at least a dozen years older than when she saw her last.

For some time the sisters remained locked in each other's arms, uttering no word. Edna first recovered herself. Tears were chasing each other rapidly down her cheeks.

"You do not know how I have missed you!" she exclaimed. "Why did you go away?"

"I—I—fancied you would be happier without me," Neria stammered, at a loss what to reply.

"Did you? What a mistaken notion! No one could ever make up for your loss, my precious sister."

She clasped Neria's trembling form still closer, affectionately kissing her cheek.

"I see how it is," she added. "You feared being in the way now that my husband has returned. Foolish girl! he would soon learn to prize your society quite as highly as I do."

Then, after a thoughtful pause, she resumed:

"How strange it seems that you two have not met each other yet! I was so anxious for you to be friends. Gerald is a great admirer of beauty, and you are nearer his ideal than any person I know—much nearer than I am."

Every word wrung Neria's heart, but she managed, by a tremendous effort, to remain outwardly calm.

"I have talked of you so much that my husband must feel as though he knew you already. A curious little circumstance happened last night. I am tempted to tell you all about it."

As Neria made no reply, she went on:

"I was so ill that Gerald insisted upon sitting up with me. Toward morning he fell asleep in his chair, and I heard him repeat a name twice over. It was yours, Neria. I had dreamed it so continually in his ears that he even dreamed of you."

Edna laughed pleasantly as she spoke. How far she was, poor soul, from divining the truth!

"Gerald must be somewhere about the house," she presently resumed. "Please ring that bell—I will have him called up. The sooner you are introduced to each other the better I shall like it."

"Don't," panted Neria, drawing back the outstretched hand. "Let us enjoy these first moments alone together."

Edna breathed an impatient sigh.

"It almost seems as though you purposely put difficulties in the way of meeting with my husband. No matter. There will be plenty of time. Now that you are here, I do not intend to give you up in a hurry. Aunt Faunce is better able to do without you than I am."

A silence fell. Neria sat looking thoughtfully into the fire. How her heart was aching! Every time a door shut, or a step crossed the corridor, she started up with a shiver. The fear was constantly upon her that Gerald might suddenly make his appearance in the chamber.

"Surely he knows that I am here," she thought, trying to reassure herself. "It would be cruel to put me to such a test. For his own sake as well as mine he will avoid a meeting."

Edna soon betrayed symptoms of weariness. Her strength had sadly given way. After a violent fit of coughing, she said:

"I think I could sleep if left quite to myself for a while. But you must promise not to leave the house, Neelie. I want a good long talk with you as soon as I wake up. You have never given me your real reason for going away so abruptly, the other night. I shall not rest satisfied until everything is made clear to me."

Neria withdrew to a small anteroom near by and sat down, trying to still her beating heart. She felt like one walking over a bridge of glass. At any moment something might occur to render further concealment impossible. The terrible nature of the peril incurred turned her sick and cold; and yet how was it to be avoided?

The moments wore on, and Neria was buried so profoundly in gloomy reflections that she did not hear the soft, light steps that approached the door, nor the knob as it was gently turned. Looking up all at once with the sudden consciousness of another presence in the room, she beheld Gerald Atherton standing before her.

He was deadly pale, and his eyes burned with an unsteady light. "Hush!" he whispered, stretching out his hand to detain her as, after the first startled exclamation, she attempted to slip past. "Did you think I would let you come and go without exchanging even a word with you?"

Neria sunk into a chair, trembling with pain and anger.

"How dare you enter my presence?" she panted. "The very least you could do was to remain aloof."

"Forgive me."

"How can I? You have betrayed the trust I reposed in you. You know very well that I would not have entered the house but for the tacit understanding that we would not meet here."

He took a step nearer, eagerly holding out his arms.

"This farce has gone far enough," he said. "Neria, darling, I find it is impossible to give you up. The old love has flamed up in my heart like a volcano. I tried to do my duty and be faithful to Edna, but it was of no use. The struggle was killing me. It has well-nigh killed you already. What is the use? You are my wife, and it is unjust that we should be compelled to sacrifice our happiness for another."

Neria had her hand on her heart—to still its convulsive throbbing.

"Hush," she cried. "I cannot listen to you. Go, go at once! I would rather die than have the truth come to light at this late day."

"You have nothing of which to feel ashamed."

"Remember Edna," she pleaded, in the husky accents of intense despair. "Be merciful to my poor sister. If you ever felt the least affection for her, I implore you to remain faithful till the end."

"And give you up?"

"Yes—a thousand times yes. Go!"

A lurid light flashed over his handsome face. "Never! You shall not torment me so. I will brave everything rather than endure it a moment longer. You are a thousand times dearer to me than when I wooed and won you in New Orleans, one year ago. I deceived you then, imagining my love for you but the evanescent passion of an hour. Now I know differently. It would be impossible to trifle with you. Heaven be praised that our marriage was legal and binding! It gives me a claim upon you that otherwise I might have lost forever."

She did not speak or move; and while she sat like one frozen to the spot, pallid and breathless, there came the soft rustle of a woman's dress across the floor, and Edna Atherton paused beside her chair!

CHAPTER XXIII.

TOO LATE!

Let us the harvest of our labor eat.

—DRYDEN.

NERIA saw at a glance that her sister had heard and understood, and all secrecy was at an end forever.

Pale and cold as a statue carved in marble she stood there confronting the two, her white dress as it swept the floor in soft, clinging folds, lending an additional air of ghastliness to her livid face. One hand was held pressed against her beating side, the other she extended with an air of command that was almost a menace. It seemed an age before the frozen lips parted.

"What is all this?" she demanded. "Tell me—I will know the truth, and the whole truth."

She knew already; but the stunned, bewildered brain needed further confirmation of the dreadful story before it could be comprehended in all its details.

Suddenly awakened from the fitful slumber into which she had fallen by the sound of voices in the ante-chamber, Edna had risen and sto-

len forth to learn who was there. The door happened to stand ajar, and almost stupefied with horror, she had listened to every word of Gerald's concluding speech.

No one replied to her for a moment. Gerald's face was livid, and his teeth chattered. Now that the crisis had come, all his bravado had deserted him.

"Why don't you speak?" Edna said, in a low, constrained voice, looking from one to the other.

Her calmness was frightful—more appalling than the most violent outbreak would have been.

"This mystery must be explained," she went on, with the air of an injured queen. "Gerald, you and Neria pretended to be strangers to each other. How is it that I find you conversing together like this?"

He made an effort to recover himself.

"The—the meeting was accidental," he stammered. "Don't think of it any more. Come back to your chamber. You are too ill to be here."

She shudderingly shook his hand aside.

"I am not to be put off," she said. "Let me know the worst at once."

Seeing him draw back she turned suddenly to Neria, and added, in accents of gentle entreaty:

"You will tell me. My brain seems numb, my thoughts sluggish. I cannot understand things as I did once. For Heaven's sake do not keep me in suspense."

Neria buried her face on her arms.

"How can I tell you?" she groaned. "How can I?"

"You will at least answer such questions as I may ask? It would be cruel to deny me that satisfaction. I wish to know if the man standing yonder is the same you have told me about—he who married you in New Orleans and afterward deserted you? Are Lawrence Gordon and Gerald Atherton one and the same?"

There was no response. After a silence that lasted only a few seconds, but seemed like as many hours, Edna added, in an apathetic voice:

"I am answered. To my mind all is now perfectly clear. Neria, I understand why you left the house so abruptly after he—Gerald—came home. You had not the courage to remain and meet him in my presence."

"Forgive me," Neria cried, falling on her knees at her sister's feet. "I would sooner die than cause you a moment's pain. I did not know, or even guess the terrible truth until the night Gerald came back. Oh, why did I ever live to see this hour?"

"You should have told me at once."

"I could not. I meant to go away and hide myself both from you and him. It was the one prayer of my heart that the truth should never reach your ears. I hoped you would live and die ignorant of it."

"God will do otherwise. It was my privilege to understand the position in which I had been placed. You did wrong in trying to conceal it from me for a moment."

Then passing one hand slowly across her forehead, she resumed:

"It is better to deal with each other plainly in such a trouble. Do not imagine, dear Neria, that I blame you in the least for what has occurred. You are as innocent of intentional wrong as I am."

"Oh, yes, yes."

"It is of our changed positions that I wish to speak. I have not forgotten the verdict of the lawyer's agent, who went to New Orleans to investigate the facts of your marriage. He pronounced it a valid ceremony. It must have been such. Gerald Atherton is *your* husband, and not mine!"

Her forced composure gave way a little as she uttered these words, and, leaning against a chair, she shuddered convulsively. They were the knell of peace and happiness lost forever to her soul.

"Don't say that," cried Neria, starting impulsively to her feet. "I have no claim upon him—wish for none. You are his acknowledged wife in the sight of the world. Keep your position as such. God forbid that I should deprive you of it!"

A slight flush kindled in Edna's pale cheeks.

"You forget," she said, sharply. "Could I live with Gerald Atherton as his wife, knowing that the title I bore rightfully belonged to another? No, I am not fallen so low as that."

Neria uttered a low cry of horror. She had never thought of the matter in that particular light.

"Heaven help us," she moaned, wringing her trembling hands.

"I shall go away from here at once," Edna re-

sumed. "Aunt Faunce has a kind heart—she will surely give me shelter. Heaven grant that I may not live long to trouble any one."

Gerald was looking at her with a stunned, stupid gaze. Seeing her turn slowly away, he sprung forward with a hoarse, inarticulate cry.

"Edna, do not leave me like this! I have been a wretch, but I promise to do everything in my power to atone for the past. I will be all you ever imagined me. Don't go!"

She coldly waved him away.

"Too late. Let me pass, if you please!"

"Will nothing shake your resolution? Do you not see that I suffer terribly, as well as you? One moment—"

The sentence was never finished; Edna suddenly pressed her handkerchief to her mouth. It was instantly covered with blood.

That terrible scene had done its work. Gerald had barely time to catch her in his arms as she fell forward insensible!

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER THE REVELATION.

Every one can master a grief
But he that has it. —SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN consciousness returned, Edna was lying on the couch in her own pretty chamber. She felt weak and ill, and could scarcely raise her head from the pillow. A sense of loss and pain weighed heavily upon her heart.

Her first thought was of Gerald. Seeing Neria bending anxiously over her, she caught her hand, saying, in an eager whisper:

"Where is he? Why is he not here?"

"I asked him to wait outside," was the answer. "Shall I tell him you have recovered, and wish to see him?"

"No, no." She fell back, drawing a quick breath. "Don't let him enter here, Neria," she pleaded. "I am weak—and I loved him so. It is better that we should never meet again."

"Calm yourself. It shall be as you wish."

A long silence ensued. Edna lay with her trembling hands clasped above her heart. She was trying to look the situation squarely in the face—to comprehend the calamity that had overtaken her.

"What is the matter with me?" she said, at last. "I feel strangely. I remember falling insensible, but that is all."

Neria tried in vain to put her off.

"The doctor says you have ruptured a blood-vessel," she reluctantly replied. "It is nothing serious, fortunately; you will be up again in a few days."

"A few days!" Edna echoed. "I must leave this house before sunset! I could not pass another night here. That is out of the question."

"Try to be patient. You are not strong enough to make any change."

"I must go—I must!" Edna cried, feverishly. "I can bear anything better than to tarry here where I have been so happy. Manage it any way you please—only yield to me."

Neria began to expostulate, but it was of no use. She was bent on getting away as quickly as possible, and could not be moved. She soon worked herself into such a fever of excitement that Neria saw it was better to yield.

"I will speak to the physician," she said, at length; "we must be guided by his advice."

She did so, and won a reluctant consent that the removal should be made at once. All that now remained was to apprise Gerald of the decision.

She found him walking up and down the corridor like one distracted. Hearing her step, he turned and came quickly toward her.

"What a fearful retribution has overtaken me!" he exclaimed. "I feel as though all was lost that made life desirable. I have sinned, but my punishment is hard to bear."

She had no wish to discuss the situation.

"I am here to speak of Edna," she coldly said. "In spite of her weak condition she is determined to leave the house at once."

"What! she persists in abandoning me?"

"Yes."

Covering his face, he groaned aloud.

"I submit. But you must let me see her alone for a few moments before she goes," he said, at length.

"Impossible!" was the decisive answer. "My sister could not endure another interview in her weakened condition. Neither does she wish it. Spare her the ordeal."

"You do not care how much my heart is wrung, or how entirely I am bereft," he passionately exclaimed.

Neria made no response. It was but a just retribution—one he had brought upon himself.

He was suffering a little of the agony he had ruthlessly brought upon others.

Edna was sitting up when she reëntered her chamber, eagerly giving orders to the maid who had been summoned. Her eyes glittered with excitement, a hectic spot burned in either cheek.

"You need pack only my plainest dresses," she said. "I shall have no use for the others, or my jewels. Leave them all together and he—Mr. Atherton—can dispose of them as he pleases."

The bewildered maid obeyed these instructions to the letter. She knew something unusual had occurred, that all was not as it should be between her master and mistress. But, as nothing had been said in her hearing, she was very far from divining the truth.

"My lady is flighty," she thought, "and has taken it into her head to go away for a while. I hope there has been no quarrel—she and master seemed so fond of each other."

It was only by a tremendous effort that Edna succeeded in keeping any control over herself. The terrible anguish and despair that swept her soul was enough to madden one. When at last all was ready, and, clinging to Neria's arm, she arose to leave the room and the house, she was almost overcome.

"I have been so happy here," she moaned, looking round at the familiar objects she had learned to love. "It will be harder than I imagined to go away and leave everything behind! Oh, my home, my once happy home, I shall see you no more!"

No tears fell from her burning eyes, but hiding her face on her sister's shoulder she stood thus for several minutes, shuddering convulsively.

"I came here a happy bride," she said, "and never dreamed what a farce I was living. A wrecked life and broken heart are all I have to take away."

"Come," said Neria, drawing her forcibly forward. "It will never do to give way like this."

The halls and corridors were clear. Gerald had taken care of that. Neither he nor Mrs. Atherton appeared—indeed, the latter had held herself aloof from the first. Not very clearly understanding the situation of affairs, all her sympathies were with her son.

It was with a last long, lingering look full of unutterable anguish that Edna left the house.

"This is my farewell," she said. "I shall never come here again, or behold anything I leave behind. It seems like taking leave of the dead."

They entered the carriage. Neria did not draw a free breath until they reached Mrs. Faunce's door. She feared that a second hemorrhage might set in on the way.

Mrs. Faunce stood waiting in the hall, her shrewd old face betraying wonder and curiosity. She fell back a step with a smothered ejaculation as her glance fell upon the pale, drooping figure of Edna.

"Mercy on me! What is all this?"

Neria made a quick sign of caution.

"Hush!" she said, in a low tone of voice. "Ask no questions, but leave me to deal with my sister alone. I will explain all, presently."

Mrs. Faunce leaned against the wall, suffering them to pass by. Never, in all her life, had she been so astonished. She was too clever by far not to realize that a terrible calamity had occurred.

"What can it be?" she vainly asked herself. "In the first place, Neria came flying here, at dead of night, for refuge, and now it is Edna. Something must be radically wrong at the Atherton mansion. But what?"

An hour later she had heard the whole story. Leaving Edna lying in the deep sleep of exhaustion, Neria sought the presence of her aunt and revealed all, without reservation.

Mrs. Faunce could scarcely believe the evidence of her senses.

"My God!" she gasped, at last. "Is it possible that Gerald Atherton is the wretch who treated you so shamefully? To think that Edna should have married him, too, and neither of you to know. It is dreadful!"

She might have done something rash in her horror and indignation had not Neria soothed and restrained her.

"I entreat you to be careful," pleaded the wretched girl. "For Edna's sake there must be no scandal. It is not necessary that the facts should ever come to light. The world will know that my sister and her husband have parted, but it need not be told the reason."

"Edna's husband!" repeated the blunt old

woman. "Why, he is yours, child!—you have the only legal claim—he married you first."

Neria's pale face flushed a little.

"What a terrible state of affairs! It is almost beyond belief. How Gerald could have remained ignorant so long of the relationship existing between you and Edna passes my comprehension. Why, even a word, or a careless reference, would have been sufficient to enlighten him."

"The explanation seems easy enough," Neria gravely replied. "I had taken the name of Granger when Gerald first met me, and he never knew it did not rightfully belong to me. My past life was a subject we never discussed, Edna seems to have been equally reticent, though from a very different motive. Pride kept her silent. It was no pleasant task to speak to her husband of a sister who had left home clandestinely to take a menial position among strangers."

"I wish I had the wretch by the neck! I could strangle him with right good will," ejaculated Mrs. Faunce.

She felt the force of Neria's reasoning, however. Yes, the secret must be kept—it was due to all.

The night passed. After that first sleep, Edna never closed her eyes. She lay quite still, a low moan escaping her lips now and then. She grew perceptibly weaker as the hours wore on. It frightened Neria to look at her. A few lagging moments had done the work of weeks.

Some time during the following day she looked up suddenly, and said in a tremulous voice:

"Have you seen him—Gerald—since we came away?"

"No," Neria replied.

She sighed heavily.

"I thought he would at least come to inquire after me."

"He has sent messengers every hour. He would scarcely dare to come himself."

A pleased light broke over Edna's beautiful, pale face. "He is not indifferent to my sufferings," she murmured. "It is a relief to know that."

CHAPTER XXV.

ENTERING INTO REST.

She said: "I am weary, weary—
Would God that I were dead!"

—TENNYSON.

NEARLY a month went by.

Edna was rapidly and surely fading. Day by day she grew weaker, her coughing fits more violent, and the hemorrhages, to which she was now subject, more frequent. It soon became impossible to disguise the fact that her tarry on this earth would not be for long.

Edna was one of the first to realize her impending fate. One day as Neria sat beside the bed, bathing her hot brow and hands with eau de Cologne, she spoke of it.

"To most persons of my age the thought of death is terrible. It only brings comfort to me. There could be no other escape from the degrading and intolerable position in which I am placed. I am ready to go."

"Oh, Edna," cried Neria, in a choking voice.

"I know you will mourn for me," she said, lifting her hollow eyes to her sister's face. "You have always loved me tenderly and devotedly. For a time it may seem very lonely here. But even you will rejoice to feel that I am at rest where shame and sorrow can never assail me more."

"Do not give up. You should try to live for the sake of those who love you."

Edna slowly shook her head.

"The burden of life is more than I could bear. God knew it, and is merciful in calling me home. A little while, and I shall be beyond the reach of grief and pain."

After a long pause she added, in a musing tone:

"When all is over I would like to be taken to my old home, and buried beside my mother. I have a notion that I could rest better there. The skies are warmer, the sun would kiss my grave, and flowers bloom earlier and later upon it. Do you promise?"

"Yes," Neria answered, unsteadily. "Anything you wish."

After that conversation, she seemed to take giant strides toward the grave. All her hopes and desires were centered in it. She lay for the most part with closed eyes, so white and shadow-like that Neria often bent over her with a thrill of terror lest the death-angel had already claimed his own.

One day, after a long silence, she suddenly stretched out her wasted hand, suffering it to fall upon her sister's.

"Neria, are we alone?" she said, in an eager whisper. "I have something to say to you before it is too late."

"You can speak freely, dear. There is no one else to hear."

Her eyes drooped; for an instant she hesitated.

"What I wish to say concerns Gerald and—and—yourself," she faltered. "Forgive me if I cause you momentary pain. I know that you loved him well and truly. You are his wife. He will be a better man for what he has passed through. When I am gone I want you to promise that you will take the place I have wrongfully filled, bear the name I have borne."

"Never!" cried Neria, starting back. "I could not. It would be an insult to your memory—abhorrent to my wronged womanhood."

"You will feel differently by and by, perhaps."

"I am sure I shall not."

"But it is my wish that you should be reunited," Edna said, in a solemn voice. "Gerald will do all that is possible to atone. I know he loves you still—better than he ever loved me. You will be happy. You will take your true position in the world. A little while, and the memory of this time will seem like a horrible dream."

"Do not speak of such a consummation!" Neria exclaimed. "I could not entertain the thought for one moment. I cannot—dare not tell you my feelings toward one who has so wronged us both. Let us not talk more of it. I cannot bear it."

At a late hour of that same evening, as Neria sat beside the couch, there came a low tap at the window. Edna was asleep. Neria rose with a startled feeling, and, approaching the window, drew back the shade.

Gerald stood there on the little balcony that extended along the front of the house. His figure appeared clearly outlined against the starlit sky.

He signed for Neria to raise the sash. "How is she?" he eagerly inquired, drawing her out beside him the instant she had complied with his request.

"Fading rapidly away," she answered, with difficulty restraining her tears. "A few days more will see the end."

"You have relinquished all hope?"

"Yes."

He stood silent a moment, one hand pressed tightly upon his throat.

"Can I see her?" he said at length in a hoarse voice that sounded utterly unlike his own.

"Of what use would it be?"

"I could ask her forgiveness again. It would be a comfort to me. Perhaps there is some reparation I could make. God knows how willingly I would do anything in my power—even to give my life."

Reparation! at that late day! It turned Neria sick to think of it. The time for that had gone by forever.

While she stood silent, trembling with sorrow and indignation, there came a rustling sound within the room, and a feeble voice spoke her name:

"Neria, where are you?"

She entered hastily. Edna lay with her eyes wide open, breathing heavily and painfully. Her countenance wore an expression so strange that Neria was struck by it. She felt at once that the shadow of an awful presence was in the room.

"You are worse?" she exclaimed.

Edna feebly put up her hand.

"Yes," she answered, her voice scarcely audible for weakness. "I feel that the end is here. It has come sooner than we expected—almost too soon for my purpose, perhaps."

Then, fixing her glazing eyes eagerly on her sister's face, she added:

"I have one request to make. I must see him before I die! Do not refuse me. I could not go without. I always meant to send for him at the last. I loved him so—no one could blame me for that. Neria, Neria, you have not the heart to refuse my dying request?"

A moment's hesitation, and the wretched girl cried in a voice of grief and horror:

"No, no! You shall see him."

"Thank you. Pray send at once—I feel that I am going rapidly."

"There is no need—he is here!"

Edna started up with a wild glitter in her eyes.

"Here! Oh, do not deceive me. I could not bear it."

Neria went straight to the window and threw back the blind.

"You can enter," she said to the cold, shivering figure that waited outside.

A glad cry came from the couch as Gerald stepped across the sill. He went feebly on, and falling on his knees, caught the hand of the dying, and held it pressed convulsively to his lips.

"Oh, Edna, is it thus we meet at last?"

She laid her cheek against his, and so held him fast for a moment. All the pain and grief were gone from her face—a divine peace reigned there instead.

"You are with me again," she breathed, "and I can die content."

After a brief silence she looked up and said:

"Kiss me, Neria, then leave us alone together. My last moments belong to him."

What passed within that room no one ever knew. At last, after a long interval, Gerald threw open the door and fell half fainting across the threshold. Neria did not stop to question him, but entered hastily.

All was still. Edna lay with her hands folded, a peaceful smile parting her lips. That tortured heart had found rest at last.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BITTER END.

But whatso'er its end below,
His life began and closed in woe.

—BYRON.

FASHIONABLE New York society was shocked and startled when news of Edna's death, after so brief an illness, went abroad. To the giddy multitude it seemed but a day since she had been one of their number, mingling in every festivity, gay, happy, young, beautiful and beloved. It was hard to realize that she had gone down to death so suddenly, in the early dawn of womanhood, crowned with the glory of immortal youth, at an age when life and the pleasures of this world seem brightest and most alluring.

She was laid to rest as Gerald Atherton's wife, and her society friends never knew—never will know—the miserable secret that shortened and saddened the life that might otherwise have been so happy.

For her sister's sake, that no suspicion might be awakened, or reproach cast upon Edna's memory, Neria accompanied Gerald to the grave. It was a terrible ordeal, however. The instant all was over, she withdrew to the seclusion of Mrs. Faunce's house, and with an aching heart, took up the burden of her solitary existence.

The sorrow-laden weeks went by. She never went abroad, and received no visitors until one May afternoon when, as she was sitting listlessly in the drawing-room, one of the servants ushered in a gentleman.

Neria rose with a beating heart. It was Gilbert Brandon. A quick glance told the agitated girl that he was looking better and more at rest than she had ever seen him.

"I am going away," he said, holding her trembling hand for a moment, "and only came to say good-by."

Making an effort to calm herself she inquired:

"Where do you go?"

"To Europe. A change of scene will be good for me, I fancy."

"Will you be long away?"

"That is uncertain," he replied. "At least a year or two."

Neria felt a sudden twinge of pain that she did not attempt to analyze.

"Mrs. Charlton will be very lonely," she said.

"Yes. I hope you will go frequently to see her while I am absent. Nothing would please her more."

A brief silence ensued. When Gilbert Brandon spoke again, it was in a voice that quivered despite all his efforts to keep it steady.

"I wish to ask you one question before I go, Neria. It is this: Do you still consider yourself bound to that man—to Gerald? I cannot leave in this uncertainty respecting your position. I would gather from your own lips an inkling of what your future is to be."

She shook her head, a slight flush kindling in her cheeks.

"I intend spending it here with aunt Faunce," she replied. "I am as one dead to the world, and expect so to remain. Life has few interests to one who has passed through deep waters like myself."

"And Gerald Atherton?"

"I hope and pray he may never cross my path again," she uttered, with vehemence.

"You look upon yourself as his lawful wife?"

"Yes. It was a valid marriage. Nothing save death can set it aside."

The man's face fell; a sort of smothered groan broke from his lips.

"Good-by," he said, abruptly, again clasping her hand for an instant. "It is useless for me to linger. May Heaven bless and keep you."

The days seemed lonelier than ever after he went away. Neria had never before realized the dreariness of her position so sensibly. A sense of want and dissatisfaction was constantly before her mind. At last she came to feel that any change to break the dreary monotony of the dragging days would be welcome.

It came, though in a form she had scarcely expected or desired. One memorable morning, Gerald Atherton was ushered unceremoniously into her presence. She had not seen him since the day of Edna's funeral, and was shocked and surprised at the change visible in his appearance. He looked haggard and wild-eyed, and his face was thin and worn.

"I have lived in torment, these last few weeks," he uttered, after some painful words had passed between them. "I could endure it no longer. Neria, your resentment must have passed away ere this. You will not refuse me the kind words for which my heart is hungering?"

"What do you expect?" she calmly demanded, though all her pulses were throbbing. "That bright dream of one year ago was very sweet to us both. I have never forgotten it. Why should we not live it over? This estrangement is terrible. It has continued too long already. There should be an end of it."

He was coming nearer, but she waved him resolutely away.

"It is necessary we should understand each other once and forever," she said. "You and I have nothing in common, Gerald Atherton. The sooner we part to see each other no more, the better."

He gazed at her a moment, trembling with intense excitement.

"You are not in earnest, Neria," he gasped.

"You can't be."

"Yes," she replied. "The gulf between us is deep as death—and as impassable."

"Don't say that," he pleaded, in accents of bitter anguish. "I cannot give you up. Every obstacle has been removed—nothing stands in the way of our happiness. I will acknowledge you to all the world as my cherished wife. Oh, Neria, it is not possible that you have ceased to love me?"

She shrank with a shudder from his outstretched arms.

"Even so," she said. "You killed my love—the only marvel is that you did not kill me as well. The last remnant of affection perished from my heart while I watched by the dying bed of my darling. My own hideous wrongs I can forgive—hers I never will! You dealt foully, treacherously, monstrously by us both. Go, now; I have no more to say to you. Let us end this distasteful scene."

"Neria—"

"Go, at once!" she repeated, drawing herself up. "Henceforth we are as strangers to each other."

"Have you no pity—no compassion?"

"None for you," she coldly replied. "Do not compel me to summon a servant to show you the door."

A strange cry of blended anguish and rage broke from his lips. He saw that all was lost—persistence would be useless.

"Great God! Is this to be my punishment?" he groaned, striking his clinched hand against his forehead.

The next moment he was gone. Neria saw him climb into the light carriage that waited before the door, snatch up the lines, and strike the horse a cruel blow with his whip.

Others who saw him that day said he drove furiously through the streets, his muscles set, his face pallid as death, his eyes wild and glittering. The result was what might have been expected. Suddenly his light carriage became entangled in a snarl of heavier vehicles; the frightened horse became uncontrollable; and then the catastrophe occurred. Gerald was thrown headlong against a curbstone only a few feet distant, where he lay a mass of lacerated and quivering flesh.

He spoke but once after they picked him up. "Neria will forgive me now," he murmured,

and so closed his eyes upon this world, where his years had been few, but full of evil.

Who will say that a violent death was not the fitting end of such a life?

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

I read her bosom better than she knew.

—J. G. HOLLAND.

No event of importance marked Neria's life during the next twelve months. Time, as it rolled by, brought healing on its wings, as it ever does, and her grief for Edna's sad fate became a sorrowful memory.

Of Gerald she did not permit herself to think at all. She wished to forget that such a person had ever existed.

The life she led was a very useful one, full of charity and deeds of benevolence. Mrs. Faunce's abundant wealth, of which she was the acknowledged heir, rendered it an easy matter to give with a generous hand, and she spent her time in searching out and relieving cases of distress.

But one relaxation did the devoted girl permit herself—a monthly visit to Cragnest, in order to spend a day with Mrs. Charlton. Gilbert Brandon still remained abroad, but his sister often read long extracts from his manly and entertaining letters, and Neria soon began to look forward to these occasions with a degree of pleasure and interest of which she was scarcely aware.

At last there came a day when Mrs. Charlton hurried to meet her, radiant and happy, the moment the carriage drew up before the door.

"I have a pleasant surprise in store for you, dear," she said. "Come this way."

Perplexed and curious, Neria followed her hostess to the drawing-room door. Mrs. Charlton paused on the threshold, gently thrusting her within the room. "I'm going to leave you to find out what it is for yourself," she added, laughingly, and hurried away.

Neria scarcely dared raise her eyes. She felt intuitively what was coming, even before a warm hand clasped her own, and a rich voice said, close to her ear:

"Have you no words of welcome for a homesick wanderer?"

Gilbert Brandon stood beside her, bronzed with foreign travel, handsome and more manly-looking than when he went away. The expression of peace and content it once had lacked was on his face. Neria felt herself blushing crimson as he bent above her. It was a happy moment.

"Welcome home!" she murmured.

Clasping her in his arms, with all a lover's unreasoning impatience, he cried:

"Neria, speak to me, love! Tell me if there is any need ever to leave you again!"

She leaned her head upon his shoulder with a happy sigh. That was her answer.

After storm had come sunshine, after trouble a calm. She had found shelter from all her sorrows in a love that would never weary—never grow cold.

THE END.

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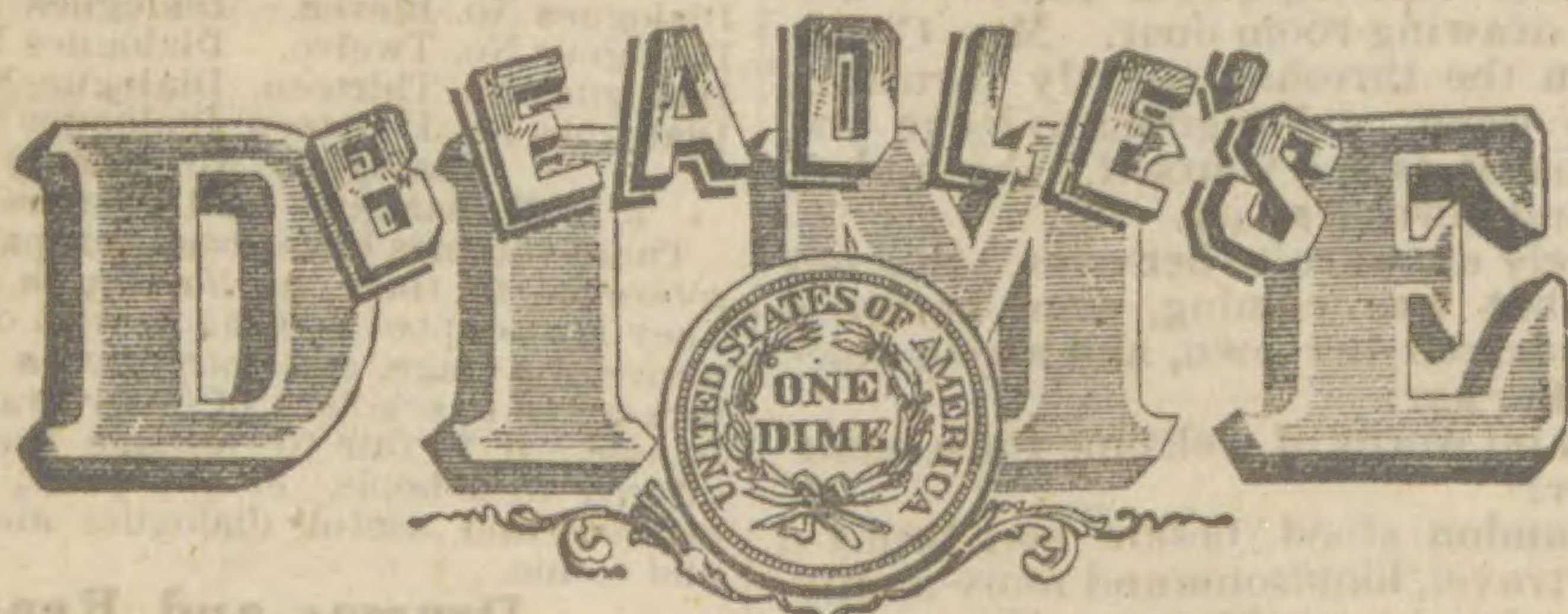


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